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ABSTRACT

The relationship between literacy and unemployment was examined through two research activities: a review of changing patterns of unemployment, changing directions in adult literacy and basic education in Australia, and literacy programs for unemployed people and interviews with a sample of 27 Commonwealth Employment Service (CES) clients who had been referred by the local CES office to a technical and further education (TAFE) college in the metropolitan west of Sydney. Of the 27 interviewees, 16 (60%) were happy to have been referred to TAFE literacy programs. Nearly all those who welcomed referral to TAFE were from non-English-speaking backgrounds, and only three were Australian born. Interviewees' age and work aspirations and prospects also affected their attitudes toward enrolling in TAFE. Even those who were reluctant to enroll in TAFE generally believed that enrolling in TAFE would be in their best interests. Most interviewees attributed their unemployment to their low literacy skills rather than to the recession. Policymakers were advised to bear in mind that, although literacy is vitally important for many jobs, low English literacy skills do not automatically render people unemployable or nonfunctioning members of society. (Appended is an interim literacy course matrix. Contains 154 references.) (MN)

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University of Technology, Sydney

Centre for Language and Literacy

Literacy and the Unemployed

Unemployed adult literacy students reflect on their referral by the CES to a literacy program and the role of literacy in their employment opportunities

Stephen Black

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
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ABBREVIATIONS

ABE	Adult Basic Education
ABS	Australian Bureau of Statistics
ACAL	Australian Council for Adult Literacy
ACER	Australian Council for Educational Research
ACOSS	Australian Council of Social Service
ACLAME	Advisory Council on Languages and Multicultural Education
ACTRAC	Australian Committee for Training Curriculum
ACTU	Australian Council of Trade Unions
AEC	Australian Education Council
AGPS	Australian Government Publishing Service
ALAN	Adult Literacy and Numeracy
ALBE	Adult Literacy and Basic Education
ALBSU	Adult Literacy and Basic Skills Unit
ALLP	Australia's Language and Literacy Policy
ALP	Australian Labor Party
AMES	Adult Migrant English Service
ANTA	Australian National Training Authority
APL	Adult Performance Level
ARA	Australian Reading Association
ARIS	Adult Basic Education Resource and Information Service
BSC	British Steel Corporation
CABE	Certificate in Adult Basic Education
CES	Commonwealth Employment Service
CTEC	Commonwealth Tertiary Education Commission
DEET	Department of Employment, Education and Training
DFE	Division of Further Education
DIR	Department of Industrial Relations
EPAC	Economic Planning Advisory Council
ESB	English Speaking Background
ILCM	Interim Literacy Course Matrix
ILY	International Literacy Year
LTU	Long Term Unemployed
MOVEET	Ministers of Vocational Employment, Education and Training
MSC	Manpower Services Commission
NBEET	National Board of Employment, Education and Training
NESB	Non English Speaking Background
NPL	National Policy on Languages

OECD	Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development
OYA (NSW)	Office of Youth Affairs
RaPAL	Research and Practice in Adult Literacy
RAWFA	Reading and Writing for Adults
SIP	Special Intervention Program
STB	State Training Board
TAFE	Technical and Further Education
VLTU	Very Long Term Unemployed
WELL	Workplace English Language and Literacy

PREFACE

This project was funded under the Australian Language and Literacy Policy (ALLP) in mid 1992. The ALLP was published in August 1991 and an important element of the policy was the provision of literacy programs for the unemployed, and especially the long term unemployed, as a means of assisting them to get jobs.

The first of these literacy programs had just commenced in some TAFE colleges in New South Wales at the time when a submission was made to conduct this research which focuses on the perceptions of jobseekers undertaking these programs. Anecdotal evidence at the time suggested jobseekers had some quite different needs and dispositions to the traditional adult literacy student groups in TAFE colleges.

The interviews with CES referred 'clients' which form the main basis for this research were conducted during 1993, a period of very high unemployment and the height of the recession. The analysis and most of the writing was undertaken throughout 1994, a period in which the country came out of recession and the unemployment rate started to fall significantly.

The main focus of this research, however, is the recessionary period during 1993 when the interviews were conducted. While it is recognised that Federal Government policy on the unemployed has shifted during 1994, in particular with the publication of the White Paper *Working Nation* (Keating 1994), the essential arguments made in this research report remain applicable to this later period and beyond. The plight of the long term unemployed may currently not feature as prominently in the media and in the affairs of the nation generally, but literacy programs for this target group remain an important part of government policy on assisting the unemployed to get jobs.

It may be worth mentioning at this point that throughout this research report I make reference to the term 'clients' (from the CES) in preference to 'students' (at TAFE). This is not because I wish to promote corporatist ideology more readily associated with the term 'clients', but rather, because it more appropriately indicates the main focus of the report. This report is not so much about pedagogy, but about unemployed people, CES 'clients'.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

A number of people have provided me with important support and assistance during the period of this research. In particular I thank Mike Baynham who supervised the research for having sufficient patience and faith in my ability to see it to fruition. There were times when he must have had some doubts, but this was never articulated and he provided encouragement and constructive support throughout.

I would like to thank my teaching colleagues Edd Ashmore, Kay Thorp and Charmaine Caldwell who each played a major role at the college level in providing literacy programs for the unemployed. They have shared with me many of their insights into these programs and have helped me to clarify my thinking on important issues explored in this research report. This is not to suggest, however, that they are necessarily in agreement with many of the views I present.

I would also like to thank Rosie Wickert and Hermine Scheeres for reading through and commenting on drafts of the report, and Liza Sunderlin and Karen Fletcher for proof reading and preparing the report for publication.

Finally, I would like to thank the twenty-seven CES 'clients' who gave their time to be interviewed by me. There was little in it for them, but they nevertheless responded freely and with surprising frankness.

INTRODUCTION

New Directions

... jobseekers with fundamental literacy difficulties will in future be sent to TAFE and adult community education providers for assistance (DEET 1991a, p.8)

This is a research report about long term unemployed people who are referred to a Government funded literacy/numeracy program as a means of improving their job prospects. Primarily, the focus is on the perceptions and dispositions of these unemployed people, both in relation to the process of their referral to a literacy program and the role they see literacy playing in their employment prospects. The report seeks to relate this qualitative picture, as presented through interviews with a sample of CES (Commonwealth Employment Service) clients, to the broader socio-political context of government policy on literacy and the unemployed.

It was the Commonwealth Government's 1991 White Paper *Australia's Language: The Australian Language and Literacy Policy* (ALLP) which heralded the beginning of a concerted national effort to provide literacy and numeracy programs for long term unemployed people registered with the CES.

For the last three years (1992-4) many thousands of unemployed people have been referred to these literacy/numeracy programs, most often in TAFE (Technical and Further Education) colleges, but also in community colleges, SkillShare centres and a range of other providers. To provide some idea of the scale of these operations, in NSW TAFE alone during 1993 over three thousand CES referred 'clients' participated in literacy/numeracy programs funded under the ALLP (NSW TAFE 1994).

It is important to emphasise that there is nothing new in unemployed people participating in literacy/numeracy programs. For example, in the period just preceding the release of the ALLP, seven hundred of a total of three thousand two hundred ABE (Adult Basic Education) students in NSW TAFE were identified as unemployed (NSW TAFE 1991). And as far back as 1980, when

adult literacy provision was just developing in most States and Territories, a national survey of adult literacy provision identified the unemployed as the principal 'target group' in several literacy schemes (Dymock 1982, p.68).

The Commonwealth Government has also long recognised that people lacking literacy and/or numeracy skills are likely to experience difficulties in obtaining and maintaining employment and that the Commonwealth has a role in providing funding for adult literacy/numeracy programs (see *The Report of the House of Representatives Select Committee on Specific Learning difficulties 1976* reported in Cadman 1978).

After the ALLP

Literacy/numeracy provision for unemployed people following the ALLP, however, is quite different from any provision that has existed over the past fifteen years or more. There are a number of key differences.

The first difference is of course the scale of Commonwealth funding for the unemployed and therefore the number of literacy/numeracy program participants emanating from the ALLP is so much greater. In the early nineties we have a 'national' response to providing programs for the unemployed as opposed to the piecemeal provision of previous years.

It involves specifically targetted funds resulting from Federal Government policy. There was no major governmental policy on providing literacy/numeracy programs to the unemployed before the ALLP. The National Policy on Languages (NPL - see Lo Bianco 1987a) for example, makes no reference to unemployed people, and the Commonwealth NPL funds made available nationally and those that subsequently flowed to the States and Territories in the period from 1988 to 1990 only rarely targetted the unemployed (a study by Cumming & Morris 1991 being one rare exception). And this was despite one of the objectives of the NPL funding being to improve students' 'economic participation in society' (ACLAME 1990, Coopers & Lybrand 1990, Ernst & Young 1990).

Government policy and initiatives under International Literacy Year from 1990 also failed to focus on the unemployed in any substantial way though significantly they did highlight the role of

literacy within the economy at the very time when the economic situation was deteriorating and when major changes were planned for 'managing' the unemployed (ie the move to an Active Employment Strategy see DEET 1992a, pp.32-3).

Clearly, the rapidly deteriorating economic situation from 1990 gave rise to an increasing focus on unemployed people in the ALLP and subsequent Commonwealth Government increases in funding for jobseeker literacy/numeracy programs (Beazley 1992).

A second factor making the ALLP provision different from previous literacy/numeracy provision for the unemployed was that ALLP funding was specifically focussed on the 'long term unemployed', that is, people registered unemployed for a period of one year or more. People in this category are considered by the Commonwealth Government to need additional support if they are to enter the ranks of the employed.

Third, these unemployed people are referred to literacy/numeracy programs by the CES as part of an 'Active Employment Strategy' in which they (CES clients who are long term unemployed) are usually required to sign a Newstart agreement with the CES which usually involves the clients undertaking education and training aimed at improving their employment prospects.

Informally in the past the CES has often referred individual clients specifically to literacy/numeracy programs in TAFE and other providers, but this has always involved 'voluntary' participation, and there has usually been no funding provided by the CES. Under the Active Employment Strategy there is the possibility that some clients may feel an 'obligation' as part of their agreement or contract with the CES to participate in one of these programs.

Further, the CES, through its close relationship with the Department of Social Security, has the potential, based on an 'activity test', to bring pressure to enforce agreements with clients by the threat of withdrawing client allowances if the agreement is not complied with. The extent of this pressure is unclear but it may lead to the 'perception' of such pressure from the point of view of many CES clients.

A major shift in focus

In NSW TAFE, the site for this current research report, the prospect of suddenly, from the beginning of 1992, having many long term unemployed people referred by the CES to literacy/numeracy programs represented a major shift in focus and direction for the adult basic education sections that provided these programs. It was not so much the increased numbers of students that was a cause for concern, but that many of these clients, because they have been sent by the CES, may not have the same motivation and positive attitudes towards participating as the regular ABE student population.

ABE sections have rarely had to manage reluctant learners, but faced the prospect of doing so with these new Commonwealth funded programs. However, it is the attitudes or dispositions of the CES clients to participating in these programs that provides the major focus for this report rather than how the educational provider responds to this new student population.

For many, perhaps most, of the CES clients referred to literacy/numeracy provision at TAFE under the ALLP, the process of their referral may appear automatic, perhaps even predetermined. They are likely to end up referred to a TAFE basic education class primarily because they are unemployed and registered with the CES.

The Newstart agreement, as mentioned earlier, is for CES registered clients who have been out of work for a year or more. The ultimate goal of the agreement is employment for the client. Resulting from individual Newstart interviews, those clients who consider they lack the literacy/numeracy skills, or those clients whom the CES consider lack the skills to enable them to undertake training programs or to get a job are very likely to be referred to TAFE for an assessment of their literacy/numeracy skills. And if the assessors at TAFE consider that clients have literacy/numeracy needs and that they would benefit from an improvement in these skills, the chances are that participation in a literacy/numeracy program will be recommended and will form an important part of the client's Newstart agreement.

This at least is the situation in recessionary times when the chances of gaining employment in the near future are limited. Thus, for CES registered clients who have been out of work for a period of more

than one year, and who admit to having some difficulties with literacy or numeracy, it is almost inevitable that they will end up being referred to a literacy/numeracy program.

The situation is new for all concerned – for the clients being sent to TAFE, for the CES who negotiate the agreement with clients and liaise with TAFE, and for the teachers and other staff who provide literacy/numeracy programs at TAFE. There are clearly many issues at stake in such a new and extensive Commonwealth funded initiative as this, but only some of them can be discussed in detail in this study.

Limitations of this report

It is important in this introduction to make clear the limitations of the report. The focus is primarily on CES 'clients', not the CES or the educational provider. Having said this, chapter four does in fact briefly consider some 'critical reflections' from the viewpoint of the educational providers, but the study is not an evaluation of the relative success or failure of literacy/numeracy provision conducted under the ALLP and neither is it a critique of CES Newstart procedures, although inevitably discussion will reflect on aspects of both.

Neither is it the concern in this report to assess in some way the extent to which these CES clients have actually improved their literacy/numeracy ability or have improved their job skills. The intention is not to provide any cognitive program outcomes.

The primary focus is on client dispositions. What are their views on a range of issues relating to their having to participate in a literacy/numeracy program just because they are unemployed for a long time? Few studies seem to be interested, as this one is, in asking CES clients what they think about the process of being sent to basic education in TAFE.

Questions posed in this report

Some of the questions posed in this report include:

- How do CES clients feel about the process of their referral to a literacy/numeracy program?
- Are they happy to attend such a program?
- Are they doing so just as a means of pleasing the CES or are they motivated to participate because it will be in their own best interests?
- Did they experience any pressure by the CES to participate?
- What do they think would happen if they resisted efforts to send them to a literacy/numeracy program?
- How do they see their participation in a literacy program in relation to obtaining a job in the future?
- How does this relate to their previous work experiences in which literacy may or may not have played a role?
- And based on the responses to these questions, what are the implications for the CES and educational providers like TAFE of providing literacy/numeracy programs for jobseekers?

The report deliberately poses some challenging and controversial questions. It aims not to just outline the often taken-for-granted and generally accepted perspectives represented in many government publications on issues to do with education and unemployment. I will argue that these publications, of which the ALLP is the key one, present essentially a 'dominant discourse', a 'consensus-oriented' world view which sees, among other things, lack of literacy and numeracy contributing to (or causing) unemployment and social welfare problems (see DEET 1992a, p.9) and also representing a wasted human resource at a time when human resources are seen as the nation's greatest asset.

Literacy/numeracy programs, therefore, are funded by the Federal Government and represented in government publications with a social justice rationale for assisting the long-term unemployed and particularly disadvantaged adults to get jobs during tight economic

times and at the same time add to the nation's international competitiveness within the context of a restructured economy (DEETa/b 1991).

Presented in this report are some of the contradictions inherent in such a discourse position. There are many conflicts and broader political and socio-economic issues at stake. These will be outlined briefly in the introductory chapters and will then be looked at from the point of view of the individual clients who are the target of Federal Government policies on the unemployed.

The intention is to explain how government policy on long term unemployment and literacy provision intersect at the personal client level - the individual conflicts and frustrations of being unemployed, of seeking work when there isn't any, of being sent to TAFE, of negotiating with the bureaucracy in the CES and TAFE, and of the myriad other issues that confront CES clients, most of whom basically just want to work.

The perspectives outlined represent the lived experiences, the 'voices' of long term unemployed people referred to TAFE for literacy/numeracy programs. Many of these perspectives substantiate a critical picture in which the dominant discourse presented in many government (and non-government) publications can be 'contested', and alternative 'readings' provided which reflect the operation of some broader political and socio-economic agendas.

The site for this report

As indicated, the site for this report is NSW TAFE. The main data for this report are drawn from the transcripts of recorded interviews undertaken with a total of twenty seven CES clients referred to TAFE basic education programs during 1992/93. As with any qualitative study of this kind involving a relatively small interview sample, generalising the findings to other regions and contexts is problematic. Nevertheless, the report reveals some important insights into the thoughts, feelings and attitudes of some CES clients referred to literacy/numeracy programs.

Chapter outline

The report starts with the issue of unemployment – the key facts and the broad context for the whole report.

Chapter one first examines statistics on unemployment asking how many people are unemployed, and in particular, long-term unemployed? What are the changing patterns of unemployment? This is followed by a look at the main characteristics of the unemployed, the age groups affected and some details on gender, ethnicity and other socio-economic factors. Finally, Government policy on managing the unemployed is outlined, including details on Newstart and recent education and training programs for the long term unemployed.

Chapter two continues to provide a broad context for the report. It looks at the major shifts in the direction and focus of adult literacy and basic education over the past twenty years in order to indicate how the current focus on literacy programs for jobseekers has developed. It looks at the way in which the field started as a largely unfunded volunteer provision committed to meeting the 'individual' felt needs of people who come forward for assistance to the current 'corporate federalist' situation in which literacy programs are seen to play an integral economic role in developing a more productive culture in which the country can become more internationally competitive. Corporatism in this sense refers to the coalition of government, industry, business and union interests that provide support for this new economic role of literacy.

Chapter three looks more specifically at the discourse of literacy programs for the unemployed. It looks at the often taken-for-granted perspectives or axioms that prevail within this corporate federalist world view such as the generally accepted view that people cannot get jobs because they lack particular literacy skills and the implicit assumption that the absence of literacy skills causes unemployment. This dominant discourse is challenged to indicate that the situation is really more complex and that there are alternative positions that can be adopted. This chapter represents a critique of the human capital model which currently pervades government policy on education and training, and in particular, literacy programs for the unemployed and outlines the way in which unemployed people can be manipulated to serve the interests of broader socio-political concerns.

Chapter four takes a brief critical look at some of the reflections of teachers and program managers on the provision of literacy programs for the unemployed. It features some literacy programs conducted by TAFE and other providers, and also an overseas perspective.

Chapter five outlines the research methodology used in this report and provides statistical data on the CES clients who form the interview sample.

Chapters six and seven present an analysis of CES client responses to key issues in jobseeker literacy/numeracy programs. These two chapters focus on two main aspects - the personal reactions of CES clients to being referred to a literacy program, and the role these clients see literacy playing in their employment prospects.

Finally, **Chapter eight** links the macro political and socio-economic agendas outlined in chapters two and three to the experiences of the CES clients in the interview sample, and from this some general conclusions are drawn.

CHAPTER ONE

Unemployment: Some facts and a context

Today the nation's number one priority is to find jobs for unemployed Australians (Committee on Employment Opportunities 1993a, p.1).

The above sentence begins the recent (December 1993) Green Paper on unemployment entitled *Restoring full employment: A discussion paper*. Much of the data and discussion points provided in this chapter make reference to this publication and its companion volume of background papers (Committee on Employment Opportunities 1993a & 1993b). The Government's White Paper policy response entitled *Working Nation: Policies and Programs* (Keating 1994) was published in May 1994, but this document does not provide as much background detail on unemployment as that provided in the Green Paper.

The purpose of this chapter is to provide a context for the study of literacy programs for the unemployed. It looks at the reasons why these programs developed from the point of view of the worsening economic situation, a recession which has seen unemployment grow substantially, and second, the shift in government policy on the unemployed to what is termed an 'active' employment strategy. It was within the context of this policy shift and its implications for labour market programs, together with the increasing recognition of the significance of language and literacy with the release of the ALLP, that the government promoted and funded literacy/numeracy programs for the long-term unemployed. This chapter outlines some of the key facts – the characteristics of unemployment and in particular those who are long term unemployed, and then explains how government policy responded with an active employment strategy. The final section of this chapter looks briefly at some client perspectives on participation in labour market programs under an active employment strategy.

Unemployment as a field of enquiry is extremely broad and complex with extensive economic and statistical data available. For the most part this chapter will focus on the pertinent data and issues relating to 'long-term' unemployment, though links will be

made with some of the more general issues of unemployment in Australia in order to provide a broader context.

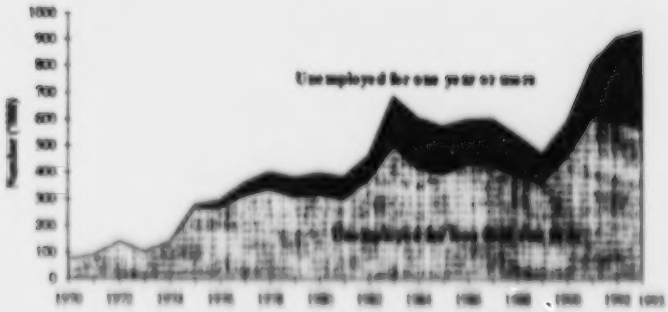
The unemployment problem

The Green Paper (Committee on Employment Opportunities 1993a) states from the very beginning that there are two overriding reasons why unemployment is a cause of so much concern. First, it represents a 'loss of production ... the single greatest source of inefficiency in our economy' (p.1). Second, 'unemployment is also the most important cause of inequality and alienation for individuals, families and communities' (p.1). Productivity and social justice therefore are the two central issues at stake identified by the Committee on Employment Opportunities, a committee commissioned by the Prime Minister. As the next chapter also indicates, these two issues play a key role in recent government policy on language and literacy.

Since the mid 1970s unemployment has increasingly become a major problem in Australian society. There was a sharp increase in unemployment in the mid 1970s, and since then there have been two large increases with the major recessions of 1982-83 and 1990-93. Following each peak the unemployment rate then settles at a new higher 'floor rate'. Unemployment reached its highest level of 12.2% in February 1993 (Committee on Employment Opportunities 1993b, p.11).

There has been growing concern especially about the long term unemployed (LTU), those unemployed for a year or more. The percentage of this unemployed category relative to the total unemployed increased from 2% in the early 1970s to 27.5% in 1983 following the recession of 1982, to around 37% in August 1993. The percentage appears to increase following peaks of unemployment (see Figure 1).

Figure 1
Unemployment August, 1970 to 1993



Secondary source: Committee on Employment Opportunities 1993b, p.11[6]

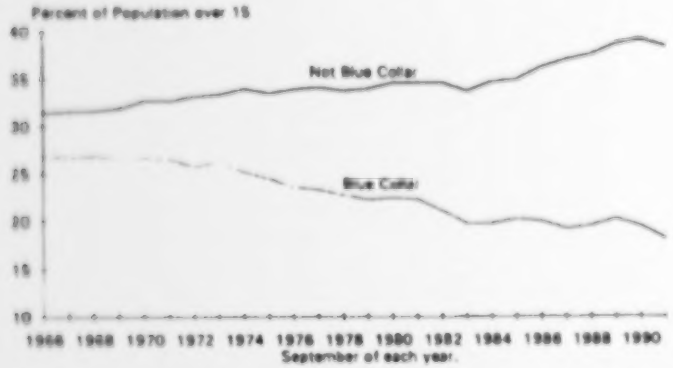
This figure of 37% long-term unemployed represents almost 340,000 people. It needs to be mentioned also that these figures are based on Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) figures, which often underestimate the numbers unemployed. It does not take proper account, for example, of discouraged workers, those underemployed, and people not seeking work for a variety of reasons, including caring for others. Women in particular form a large part of this 'hidden unemployed'.

There is also a category of 'very long term unemployed' (VLTU), those unemployed for a period of two years or more, and for this category also the situation is worsening after each unemployment peak. In August 1993 the very long term unemployed made up 20% of the unemployed and over 53% of the long term unemployed (Committee of Employment Opportunities 1993b, p.12). Such high percentages of long or very long term unemployment represent the most serious aspect of unemployment and is a major priority for Government attention. Reducing these percentages following the 1990/93 recession, however, is likely to be quite a lengthy process due to the fact that they 'lag' behind unemployment peaks and increase disproportionately as a percentage of the overall unemployment rate. There is concern that long term unemployment flows into very long term unemployment 'and then into dramatically reduced attachment to the labour market' (ACOSS 1994, p.i). The

result, according to the Australian Council of Social Service, could well be 'permanent social dislocation' for many of the most disadvantaged in the community (ACOSS 1994, p.2) and the possibility of an alienated underclass with little or no hope of ever finding work.

The above figures indicate that the longer people are unemployed the less likely they are to succeed in getting a job. According to the Economic Planning Advisory Council (EPAC) the reasons for this are unclear. They suggest it may be to do with the more employable individuals obtaining work more readily or the perception by employers that the long term unemployed must lack employment skills (EPAC 1992, p.12). Within a broader perspective it may also be a factor of social class given that the majority of the long term unemployed are relatively unskilled (having worked in 'blue' collar occupations) and lacking in formal education, and the jobs these people traditionally have worked in (in the manufacturing sector) have steadily declined, but EPAC makes no mention of this broader perspective, even though they provide the statistics to support it (EPAC 1992). Figure 2 shows the relative decline in blue collar work since the mid 1960s.

Figure 2
Persons Employed by Occupation



Secondary source: EPAC 1992, p.28

Characteristics of the long term unemployed

In this section some of the main characteristics of the unemployed, and in particular, the long term unemployed, are looked at in order to provide a broad background to the population under consideration in this study. They include:

- male and female unemployment rates (and especially as this relates to long term and very long term unemployment);
- age factors;
- qualifications;
- and the specific situation affecting non English speaking background migrants.

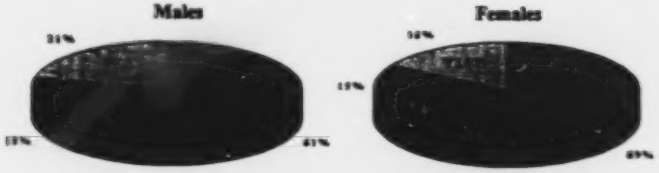
Male/female unemployment rates

As at August 1993, at the height of the recession, around 924,000 people were unemployed. Approximately 61.8 percent (571,100) were male and 38.2 percent (352,900) were female. The unemployment rate for men was 11.4 percent and the unemployment rate for women was lower at 9.8 percent. At the same time men made up 58.1 percent of the labour force and held 57 percent of the jobs (Committee on Employment Opportunities 1993b, p.13).

Significantly for this report, of the total unemployed, 17 percent had been unemployed for between one and two years (LTU) and 20 percent had been unemployed for two years or more (VLTU). In this report for the most part reference is made to the long term unemployed in a more inclusive way to include also the very long term unemployed. Reference to the specific term 'very' long term unemployed is limited to this first chapter only.

The breakdown of the duration of unemployment for males and females is shown in Figure 3.

Figure 3
Duration of Unemployment by Gender



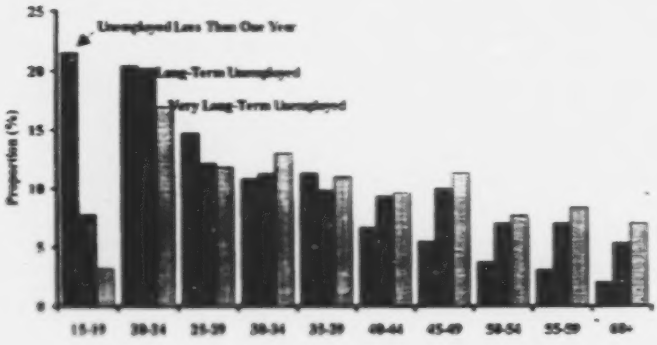
Secondary source: Committee on Employment Opportunities 1993b, p.13

Age factors

The groups within the 15 to 29 age range all have unemployment rates higher than the national average. Unemployment rates tend to decline as the age of the group increases up to the age of 44. Thereafter the unemployment rate increases, especially for the 55 and over. The decline in unemployment rate as age increases appears consistent with the greater skills and experience of older age groups. The higher unemployment rates in the 55 and over age range, however, reflects the relatively few employment opportunities open to older males (Committee on Employment Opportunities 1993b, p.14).

While the younger age groups experience higher unemployment levels, generally, from the age of 40 the rate of long term and very long term unemployment increases, indicating the difficulties older people have in obtaining employment (see Figure 4).

Figure 4
The Contribution of Each Age Group to Unemployment, Long-Term Unemployment, and Very Long-Term Unemployment, August 1993

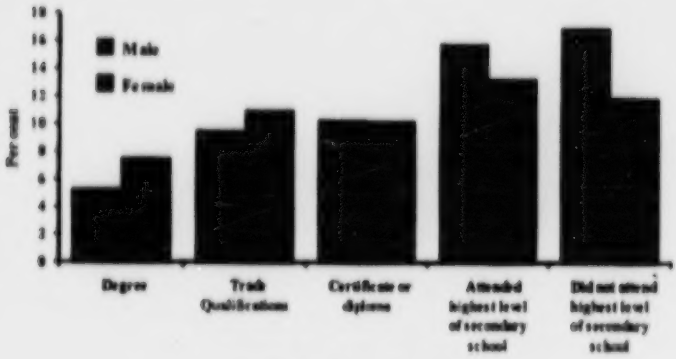


Secondary source: Committee on Employment Opportunities 1993b, p.16

Qualifications

The rate of unemployment varies according to educational qualifications. For example, as at February 1993, the unemployment rate for those without any post school qualifications was 14.8 percent while for those with degrees, trade qualifications and certificates the unemployment rate was 9.1 percent. These trends seem not to apply to the same extent with women (see Figure 5 below).

Figure 5
Unemployment Rate by Qualification and Gender, February 1993



Secondary source: Committee on Employment Opportunities 1993b, p.17

Non English speaking background migrants

Before the mid 1980s, migrants from non English speaking backgrounds (NESB) had higher rates of participation in the workforce than Australian born people. More recently, however, the situation has changed and NESB migrants participate at a level below Australian born and English speaking migrants. Structural changes in the manufacturing sector are suggested as the main reason for this. In 1966 almost 40 percent of migrants in the workforce were in the manufacturing sector compared with about 20 percent today (Committee on Employment Opportunities 1993b, p.21). NESB migrants are more likely to work in lesser skilled occupational areas compared to Australian born workers (Committee on Employment Opportunities 1993b, pp.22-3).

Recent figures (Committee on Employment Opportunity 1993, p 22), show that NESB males and females experience a rate of unemployment almost 50 percent higher than for those born in Australia (see Table 1).

Table 1
Unemployment Rates by Birthplace by Gender, August 1993

PLACE OF BIRTH	Males	Females	Persons
Born in Australia	10.7	8.9	9.9
Born outside Australia	13.5	12.4	13.1
in other main English speaking countries	10.3	7.6	9.2
in non-main English speaking countries	15.8	16.3	16
Total	**11.4**	**9.8**	**10.7**

Secondary source: Committee on Employment Opportunities 1993b, p.22

Non English speaking background migrants are also likely to experience higher rates of long term and very long term unemployment, more than twice those of the Australian born and English speaking migrants (Committee on Employment Opportunities 1993b, p.22). Further, a disproportionate rate of NESB migrants form the underemployed and discouraged jobseekers categories. Language difficulties are usually cited as an important factor here, although lack of jobs clearly affects all categories of the unemployed.

Females from non English speaking backgrounds are even more prone to long periods of unemployment than their male counterparts, which the Committee on Employment Opportunities attributes to lack of recognition of overseas gained skills and work experience, and English language difficulties (Committee on Employment Opportunities 1993b, p.93).

These are just some of the major characteristics of the unemployed. They have been highlighted because they have a particular bearing on the characteristics of the interview sample in this study as chapter five will indicate. There are other important characteristics of the unemployed, such as the disproportionate unemployment rates for Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders, people with disabilities, young people and sole parents and the fact that unemployment rates are not uniform throughout Australia, but vary markedly in different regions.

The consequences of unemployment

Much has been written about the effect that unemployment has both on the economy and the way it affects people's lives. Attention is given in this report to the latter aspect to provide a background context to the lives of long term unemployed people.

The Committee on Employment sees the social consequences of unemployment according to the following: the financial implications with the consequent drift into poverty, health effects and the impact on crime and social cohesion.

Financial implications

Clearly loss of income is the major consequence for the unemployed, many of whom will experience poverty, especially if the period of unemployment is prolonged. The income support system was designed to suit short term unemployment, not long or very long term unemployment. It has also failed to keep pace with wages generally since the early 1980s. Many long term unemployed people will see also an erosion of their skills (perceived perhaps by employers) and may take on lower skilled and lower paid work thus reducing their career and earning potential.

Income inequality in society further increases with unemployment:

> For many unemployed people, the financial hardship they experience is accentuated by the fact that they are often already disadvantaged in one way or another. These include people in low wage jobs, recently arrived migrants and Aboriginal people (Committee on Employment Opportunities 1993b, p.68).

Health effects

People's health are affected by unemployment. There are a number of studies comparing employed with unemployed people indicating the latter show significantly lower health (eg Mathers 1992, cited in Committee on Employment Opportunities 1993b, p.70). But then, the brunt of unemployment is experienced by lower skilled, lower

educated people who already, through their socio-economic disadvantage, suffer disproportionate poor health:

> The concentration of unemployment on those who are already disadvantaged emphasises the compounding of disadvantages faced by many people. It is likely that the experience of unemployment, particularly long term unemployment, exacerbates pre-existing health inequalities. (Committee on Employment Opportunities 1993b, p.71)

Social cohesion

The causal relationship between unemployment and declining mental health appears clearer than for physical health. Low self esteem, increased isolation together with anxiety and depression are well documented outcomes of unemployment (Committee on Employment Opportunities 1993b, p.71). Some researchers have also argued that unemployment is linked to crime, though this relationship is unclear and contentious (Devery 1991, EPAC 1992, p.18, Committee on Employment Opportunities 1993b, pp.72-73).

Certainly long term and large scale unemployment has the potential at a macro level to polarise society even more into the haves and the have nots, thus exacerbating pre-existing disadvantages in terms of education, health and housing. At the personal level there is evidence of increased family breakdowns resulting from unemployment (EPAC 1992, pp.17-18, Committee on Employment Opportunities 1993b, pp.73-74).

Some of these consequences become particularly apparent later in this study as the CES client interview sample relate their circumstances. Health features particularly highly.

The governmental response

Traditionally, intervention by Australian Governments to assist the unemployed has taken the form of, first, income support by way of unemployment benefits. This 'passive' income support has been criticised on the one hand from groups who claim the benefit is insufficient to sustain a reasonable standard of living and does not provide support for active job search (ACTU 1987), and on the

other hand from rightist elements who claim the system is being abused by 'dole bludgers' (see Windschuttle 1979 for a critique of 'dole bludging').

The second form of government intervention has been direct public sector job creation and training programs. Major reports have been critical of both income support arrangements (Cass 1988) and training programs for the unemployed (Kirby 1985) and thus the scene was set, which the economic downturn in 1990 no doubt encouraged, for a change in direction to an 'active society' approach to assisting the unemployed:

> The guiding principle is that labour market participation is a key to full participation in society. Paid work is seen as more effective than income support in preventing poverty and social exclusion (Committee on Employment Opportunities 1993a, p.95).

In July 1991 the Government implemented the 'Active Employment Strategy'. In practice this involved unemployment benefits being replaced by a Jobsearch allowance in the first year of unemployment, and a Newstart allowance for those unemployed for one year or more. Under Newstart long term unemployed people are interviewed at regular intervals and assessed for the skills and training considered to be necessary for their eventual employment:

> The goal is to help unemployed people to move from welfare dependency to preparation for a job and ultimately to employment (DEET 1992b, p.100).

Newstart represents a major shift in government policy on unemployment. Government publications refer to the 'special help and special encouragement and reinforcement' required to prepare the long term unemployed for jobs (DEET, 1992b, p.100). Newstart candidates are required to negotiate a personal plan with the CES aimed at getting them into the workforce usually requiring participation in education and training programs. Newstart candidates, however, appear to have little choice but to become 'active' jobseekers as the following government perspective explains:

> Along with greater concern to help the long term unemployed came the concept of reciprocal obligation - if the Government is providing income support, labour market programs and other services, it is only fair that clients take up any reasonable offer

> of assistance and do whatever they can to improve their employment prospects. In some cases clients may only be required to undertake active job search, but in others it may be reasonable to expect the client to participate in labour market programs or other activities likely to improve their chances. To reinforce this, the CES has been given authority to cancel Jobsearch and Newstart allowances if clients breach their reciprocal obligations (DEET 1992b, pp.17-18).

Not only does Newstart represent a shift in government policy, but it also represents a shift in the culture of the CES. Previously the CES provided primarily a brokerage service in which unemployed people registered, notifications of jobs were received, and the CES attempted to match the two (see NBEET 1991, p.5). The focus under an active employment policy is primarily on assisting the long term unemployed and the most disadvantaged jobseekers and involves intensive individual client contact, case management, planning and negotiation. It also involves the delicate issue of sanctions:

> Staff have also had to adjust to cancelling allowances and to reconcile this role with their primary function that is to help people to get employment, education or training (DEET 1992b, p.18).

Considerable staff retraining has been necessary (DEET 1992b, p.101). While DEET surveys indicate increasing client satisfaction with CES services (eg DEET 1993 pp.6-7), several studies have shown that the needs of individual clients are not always met. The Committee on Employment Opportunities reports on several factors that have been identified, including 'a tendency by the CES to 'process' clients rather than actively assist them', the confusion caused by the complex program structures that are available (CES staff in late 1993 were required to administer 22 major programs) as well as the lack of 'flexibility' in the administration of programs and in the services that community agencies and other groups offer to unemployed people (Committee on Employment Opportunities 1993a, p.143). In relation to the first of these:

> ... The emphasis on process means that in practice, people are often passive recipients in decisions on which program or training they must undertake (Committee on Employment Opportunities 1992a, p.143).

The sheer pressure of meeting targets for the increased numbers of Newstart clients has contributed to this situation. Successful employment outcomes for disadvantaged jobseekers may require considerable time and individual assistance:

> Many disadvantaged jobseekers are highly unlikely to obtain sustainable employment unless a coordinated and individualised sequence of assistance is provided to them over a substantial period. It will often be necessary to devote considerable time to initial identification of an appropriate pathway and to arranging the first steps ... (NBEET 1991, p.11).

The same report refers to the 'unprecedented demands on front line staff' as a result of Newstart and other initiatives under an active employment strategy (NBEET 1991, p.34). Other factors affecting the operation of Newstart include: lack of experienced CES staff, the excessive staff turnover which adversely affects relations with individual clients (NBEET 1991, p.34), and problems with the linkage of assistance (for example, training leading to work experience, leading to employment). There has also been a lack of monitoring and reviewing of program outcomes with the result that 'many clients appear to fall through the cracks' (Committee on Employment Opportunities 1993a, p.144). People with English language difficulties are acknowledged to have particular difficulties in finding information on what may be suitable for them (Committee on Employment Opportunities 1993a, p.144). Newstart arrangements therefore, for a range of reasons, haven't been as comprehensive or as successful as envisaged (see Sakkara et al 1993 cited in Committee on Employment Opportunities 1993a, p.143).

Working Nation (Keating 1994) seeks to address many of these issues. In particular, the intention is to provide a more individualised 'client focus' through case management with major elements being counselling and the identification of barriers to employment (see Pratt 1994a) which should reduce the 'tendency ... to process clients'.

CES client perspectives

The extent to which *Working Nation* succeeds in remedying many of the problems associated with managing the unemployed, and especially the long term unemployed, will be unclear for some time. It is also difficult to know what the CES clients think of these active employment measures that began from mid 1991, though some insights have been provided in a national report which looks primarily at the issues of casual, part time and temporary work for disadvantaged jobseekers (NBEET 1992). Different categories of unemployed people were looked at, but the long-term unemployed not currently in a training program were particularly scathing about their treatment by the CES. Older unemployed people in particular were 'angry that the CES pushed them into courses' (p.28). The report acknowledged that 'the CES offers an easy target and a scapegoat for anger at much bigger issues driving the changes to the labour market' (p.39), but all the same, client discontent with the CES needs to be acknowledged. In relation to this particular report on unemployment and literacy provision, the following perspectives outlined by a group of unemployed young people appear pertinent:

> Their experience of training courses did not predispose them to think in terms of the development of skills offering a stepping stone to a more secure job. While they had 'done heaps' of training courses - usually literacy and numeracy courses but also courses covering subjects such as typing, letter writing, job application skills, sales and marketing and factory work skills - the group was unanimous in its scorn for such attempts by government to get them back into the workforce. Several had dropped out or been suspended for bad behaviour. Those who had finished courses found them of no use:
>
> > 'Training only for skills won't help you. You're training for jobs you don't need training for ... and then you don't get the job anyway' (cited in NBEET 1992, p.44).

And for the older unemployed people:

> Most were disinclined to want to change direction and 'begin at the bottom' again, partly because they had all developed skills relevant to their careers already, but also because several of them had endeavoured to change directions and had found the attempt futile. All of them had done at least one training course and some had paid to do TAFE courses in the

> hope that this strategy might lead to a secure job. They had all become resigned to the view that labour market programs were pretty much a waste of time and government money in terms of being a source of jobs. They wanted 'jobs, not courses' (NBEET, 1992, p.44).

It needs to be said that the interview samples in the NBEET study were small, in fact the older unemployed group comprised only eleven people, but nevertheless, they do provide examples of 'the actual experiences of disadvantaged jobseekers, in their attitudes and opinions, and in the processes that determine outcomes for individuals' (NBEET 1992, p.5). They represent one of the few attempts to find out what unemployed people really think about what is done to them in the process of trying to get a job. To some extent this research report follows the same line of enquiry.

CHAPTER TWO

From individualism to corporate federalism: The shift in adult literacy policy and provision

An understanding of literacy programs for the unemployed requires that they not be seen in isolation as simply a new government initiative but are seen instead within the context of important shifts in government policy in a number of areas. For example, these literacy programs need to be seen within the broad context of the active employment strategy and the consequent focus on labour market programs for the long term unemployed explained in the previous chapter. They also need to be seen within important shifts in government policy on education, and in particular, adult literacy education over the past six or seven years.

The intention in this chapter is to look at this educational side of the equation - the policy shift in adult literacy provision from a focus in the 1970s and much of the 1980s on meeting the felt needs of 'individuals', to the current 'corporate federalist' position in which literacy provision is seen by government, business, industry and union leaders to have a 'centre stage' role in meeting the needs of the national economy. In essence this chapter looks at how adult literacy has developed to take on the new vocationalism, how it is now seen as one possible answer to the problems of micro economic reform, of Australia's international competitiveness and the problem of unemployment. The concern is with the broad process of the policy shifts that occur. In the next chapter the focus will be more on a critique of the prevailing discourse of literacy programs for the unemployed.

Individualism

By indicating a shift 'from individualism' it is not to be inferred that modern day literacy programs have no concern for individuals or that literacy teachers are unconcerned at meeting individual needs. White's (1983) reference to the 'primacy of the individual' as the first principle of adult literacy provision no doubt still applies from

the point of view of most literacy teachers. Rather, the dichotomy presented in this chapter indicates that in a policy sense literacy programs are increasingly being funded primarily in order to meet the economic needs of communities and the nation.

In the 1970s and for much of the 1980s there was no national coordinating policy driving adult literacy provision (see Wickert & Zimmerman 1991, p.155). Dymock's (1982) national adult literacy survey refers to early Commonwealth reports that lead to an expansion of adult literacy provision in the 1970s (Richardson 1975, Cadman 1976) but not within any policy on literacy programs other than to meet the individual needs of people who came forward for assistance and thus contribute to 'combatting illiteracy'. The situation was such that the very existence of so many people without literacy skills seemed sufficient justification in itself to recommend millions of dollars to be spent on a remedy (see for example, the CTEC Report 1984, pp.96-104, which recommended the Commonwealth Government commit increased funds for a 'campaign to combat adult illiteracy' during the period 1985-87). Or if there was any justification provided, it had little to do with economics, but rather, concern with people's democratic rights as autonomous human beings:

> The maintenance of an effective democracy requires citizens who can not only speak, read and write, but who can weigh the words of others and make judgements that are as far as possible autonomous. The universal persistence of literature in the culture of human societies suggests it is a fundamental part of what "being human" means and significant to the continuance of societies. Access to the literary tradition of the society appears to approach the status of a "right". (Commonwealth Department of Education 1982, p.10)

Lack of literacy was seen and highlighted, especially in the media, as a personal failing with enormous personal costs. Adult literacy reports and research studies from the early 1970s to the mid 1980s often highlighted the problems for individuals of not having literacy skills and how some individuals had changed (transformed in fact) as a result of participating in adult literacy programs (Grant 1985, 1986a, 1987, Nelson 1981, Waterhouse 1985). These 'life stories' were presented very much within a welfarist individualistic sense. Overseas studies on adult literacy similarly had this focus (see Charnley & Jones 1979, Eberle & Robinson 1980, Johnston 1985).

Reflecting on the brief history of adult literacy provision Shore (1993) provides a succinct summary of the development of the field in its formative stages:

> In the 1970s and 1980s, particularly in Australia and the UK, much of this provision was underpinned by liberal humanistic notions of student-centred education geared towards meeting individual needs associated with personal and academic development (p.16).

Literacy provision during this period was mainly based on volunteer tutors who were trained and then matched with individual students. This focus on both the individual and volunteerism (amongst other factors) were seen by Kirner, addressing the Australian Council for Adult Literacy (ACAL) conference in Melbourne in 1984, as contributing to the 'marginalisation' of the field. Kirner suggested the need for adult literacy to integrate with broader national agendas including equal opportunity programs and Gilding made similar points two years later at the Adelaide ACAL conference (Gilding 1986), but there was little talk during this period of national economic agendas, of people being unproductive in an economic sense because they lacked literacy skills.

The turning point

Lo Bianco perhaps best articulates the turning point which marked a policy shift in how adult literacy was perceived by governments and others. In his address to the Perth ACAL conference in 1987 Lo Bianco stated:

> One of the most common predictable experiences related by adult literacy personnel is about the empowerment which literacy can bring to individual adults. This seems to be especially true of participative and supportive learning arrangements. You will all know better than I do of the many life-transforming cases of your work. For the individuals concerned certainly, and probably for the rest of us today, this would constitute sufficient justification for claiming public resources for adult literacy. My last point today, however, is to say to you that it isn't. In more powerful places it simply is not sufficient justification (Lo Bianco 1987b).

Lo Bianco then went on to explain the economic case:

> If we are to develop an economy no longer largely dependent on the export of extractable commodities or primary products but which has a major component of export-oriented sophisticated manufacturers and the application of advanced technologies to all facets of the world of work, we must bring forward a case that literacy and a solid general education are all the indispensable grounds on which to build these changes. We only need to consider that the bulk of the new jobs being created in the economy are in the services area and in areas in which advanced technologies are important. Control over relatively sophisticated language is a prerequisite for most new work (Lo Bianco 1987b).

Prior to this time adult literacy personnel were unlikely to have been confronted with the broader economic agenda.

For Lo Bianco in 1987, literacy was a right, but not just one:

> whose neglect threatens great costs to individuals - but as our society becomes more dependent on elaborated and complex language - a right whose neglect threatens great costs to society as well (Lo Bianco 1987b).

Earlier in that year *Skills for Australia* (Dawkins & Holding 1987) and *Australia Reconstructed* (ACTU 1987) were published. Leading members of the Federal Government and the union movement therefore had made their first major case for a new skills-oriented rationale to underpin education and training in Australia. Lo Bianco's ACAL conference statement needs be seen within this emerging skills oriented context.

More recently Lo Bianco has explained policy shifts affecting language and literacy in terms of three orientations:

> Literacy as problem
>
> Literacy as right, and
>
> Literacy as resource (Lo Bianco 1993)

Traditionally adult literacy teachers and advocates have operated from the point of view of the first two of these orientations which seem to fit within the framework of individualism:

> In the pre-1986 era any debate at the federal government level on ALBE questions tended either to reflect a 'literacy as problem' orientation or a strongly 'welfarist' orientation ... Lobbyists would argue for a need to be addressed, 'There are adults who need assistance with their literacy development. They cannot read instructions on medicine bottles; cannot help their children with homework, and so on' ... (Lo Bianco 1993, p.10).

This line of argument rarely worked for adult literacy lobbyists seeking funding because of a lack of common ground between them and government representatives – adult literacy was not seen as part of the mainstream or at the interface between education and the labour market. Recently however:

> ... the discourse that surrounds policy discussions on literacy has almost reversed. The presumed target group was once the individual; the presumed solution the home tutor. Adult literacy discourse is now turning toward labour market programs (Lo Bianco 1993, p.10).

This shift is where a 'literacy as resource' orientation tends to operate, depending on the extent to which literacy can be related to economic costs and benefits. Literacy, for example, is now seen to have a key role in award and industry restructuring and the national training reform agenda generally. One of Lo Bianco's main points is to highlight the risk that the main sites for literacy provision in future could be industrial ones and that in the process other groups in need (ie those who are not working and not seeking work) may become further disadvantaged and marginalised.

Although Lo Bianco claims we have not quite moved into a 'resource orientation', all the signs are there. Shore for example states:

> In Australia adult literacy has been plugged into an economic reform machine which makes it difficult to engage in discussions about literacy beyond the workplace, literacy for unpaid as well as paid workers, and literacy for living, where

'work' is not the major preoccupation of people's lives (Shore 1993, p.16).

Corporate federalism

So far this chapter has indicated the shift in adult literacy policy from a focus on the 'individual' to an 'economic' model. But the shift in policy is more than this; the 'economic' model provides insufficient explanation of the broader power coalitions that are taking place at the national level. Corporate federalism is a concept which helps to explain these power coalitions which in turn provides a better understanding of the context of literacy programs for the unemployed.

To date corporate federalism has not been applied to adult literacy, but has mainly been applied to Commonwealth policy on schooling. It does nevertheless have strong application to adult literacy. The term has gained prominence largely through the work of Lingard and associates (Lingard 1990, Lingard, O'Brian & Knight 1993). Briefly, corporate federalism has been used to describe the policy on schooling that began with the first Hawke Labour government in 1983, but in particular, applies to the period when Dawkins became Minister for the mega Department of Employment, Education and Training (DEET) from 1987.

Lingard (1990) explains that corporate federalism needs to be seen within the context of the federal ALP government reconstituting educational policy as part of the restructuring of the Australian economy during a time of economic difficulties. As already indicated, 1987 was a key year; *Skills for Australia* (Dawkins and Holding, 1987) was published, and micro economic reform became a major government policy focus. It was also, significantly, the year the Department of Education was subsumed within the new DEET. This was more than a move to increase the efficiency of government departments – it reflected the political desire of the federal government to reframe education 'as a micro-economic reform tool' (Lingard 1990, p.2). Schooling was seen to have an integral contribution to make to the 'clever country' and a more productive culture. Within this 'human capital model' education and training are seen to have the potential to add value to people in an economic sense. The problem for the Commonwealth Government, however, was how to harness schooling to national economic

objectives, and this is where corporate federalism played its part, as Lingard et al (1993) explain:

> Given that schooling, ostensibly at least, remains a residual constitutional power of the states, and that the states still provide most of the funding for it, corporate federalism was the major Dawkins strategy for increasing commonwealth influence over policy formation for Australian schools. The rationale for its development was the need for the commonwealth to have a greater say in schooling policy, given its reframing as a component of economic policy, and given the responsibility of the commonwealth to manage the economy (Lingard, O'Brian & Knight 1993, p.231).

Lingard (1990, p.13) cites Head (1983) in explaining that corporatism is '... a tendency for elites - capital, trade unions and the state - to determine key areas of economic policy through formalised agreements and consultations'.

Sachs (1991) in a critique of corporatism states that:

> Within Australia, corporatist tendencies are evidenced in the increasing coalition between industry, unions and governments in the policy-making process for both educational and social policy. These communities of interest form a loose coalition based on a shared belief that it is in the national economic interest for education to serve the interests of capital (Sachs 1991, p.126).

Corporatism in education has manifested itself in a series of Commonwealth inspired national policies for education. Sachs (1991, p.127) refers here to *Skills for Australia* (Dawkins & Holding 1987) in which tertiary institutions and industry are the two main 'communities of interest'. Sachs also points to a Commonwealth publication *In the National Interest* (Commonwealth Schools Commission 1987) in which the argument is made that 'it is now clear that education, business and industry must work together'. Lingard et al (1993) focus on the Dawkins publication *Strengthening Australia's Schools* (Dawkins, 1988a) to make their case to explain corporate federalism. They refer also to 'a real intertextuality' with other Commonwealth education policy statements such as the *Report of the Committee of Inquiry into Labour Market Programs* (Kirby 1985), *Higher Education: A Policy Statement*

(Dawkins 1988b) and the *Finn Report* (Australian Education Council Review Committee 1991).

For Sachs (1991), in her critique of the corporatist underpinnings of these documents, the essential point is that:

> ... this new alliance has been instituted to serve the needs of business and the economy. The value of education is reduced to economic utility. Skills that are not seen to be of economic significance are devalued ... (Sachs 1991, p.127).

There is the fear therefore that industry is driving the educational agendas and that issues of equity take a back seat. What appears to be the case, however, is not so much that equity issues are ignored, but that they have been accommodated within these national policies on education in such a way that they are of secondary significance. As Lingard et al (1993, p.237) explain, it is not that equity is no longer on the agenda; 'rather it remains in ways subscribed by the emphasis given to economic restructuring'.

The ALLP as a manifestation of corporate federalism

Having briefly discussed the concept of corporate federalism mainly within a schooling context, it remains to relate it to government policy on adult literacy, and the best way to do this is to look the Federal Government's most definitive position on language and literacy: The Australian Language and Literacy Policy (DEET 1991a).

In the opening paragraphs of the ALLP, engagement with the 'economic reform machine' is made clear:

> Global economic forces are demanding changes in the structure of Australian industry, in our ability to compete in world markets, and in our readiness to adapt to new jobs, new career structures, and new technologies. These changes will require new skills in communication, understanding and cultural awareness, in the workplace as much as in the international marketplace. They will also place added pressures on our education and training systems (DEET 1991a, p.1).

As indicated above with other corporate federalist government policy statements, equity issues are not ignored, in fact the case is

presented that the ALLP is consistent with the government's Social Justice Strategy (DEET 1991b, Companion Volume pp.13-14). However, it is clear that the economic model predominates and the economic case is presented under a variety of headings including: *Economic security and productivity for individuals, enterprises and the nation* (p.20), *award restructuring, trading with the world*, and *Australian export trends* (pp 21-24). In many other sections of the ALLP companion volume reference is made to industry, unemployment and economic implications (see for example, pages 36, 41, 48, 58-60). The funding for literacy made available under the ALLP confirms that the Federal Government's priority is in the economic sphere, with major funding increases in the areas of jobseeker and workplace literacy programs 'at the expense of more equity driven policies which provide access according to need' (Office of Youth Affairs 1991).

The 'corporate' nature of the ALLP can be in little doubt as the following introductory passage of the companion volume of the ALLP indicates under the heading *The ALLP as a national partnership*:

> The ALLP is also a statement of shared responsibility. It is not simply a product of the Commonwealth. It has been developed in close partnership with all those who share a responsibility for language and literacy program delivery, particularly State and Territory government and non-government education systems and institutions, business and industry groups, the private sector, parent and multicultural groups and the clients of language and literacy programs ... Because of the numbers of partners, it is perhaps inevitable that not all members of this partnership will agree with all elements of the policy or the program response. However, in the development of the ALLP a significant degree of national consensus about needs, priorities, goals and objectives has already been achieved between the Commonwealth and State and Territory Ministers of education and training ... (DEET 1991b, pp.1-2).

Later in the document there is a section entitled *The shared role of governments, the private sector, business and industry, the broader community and individuals in language and literacy* (p.26). This section looks at the responsibilities and the costs the different 'communities of interest' will need to accommodate.

The Federal Government has very successfully promoted these shared roles and benefits of language and literacy through the ALLP and also in its preceding International Literacy Year efforts. Leading figures (elites) in industry, business and union groups and major government departments (DEET for example, which incorporates the CES) are highly supportive of language and literacy because of what they see are the potential benefits to their interests and those of the Australian economy generally (see DEET/DIR 1993, Ferguson 1991, ILY 1991a/b, NSW Labour Council 1991). These coalitions provide enormous strength to the dominant discourse presented in the ALLP of the relationship between literacy (and language) and economic development.

The 'corporate federalism' label, therefore, would appear appropriately applied to adult literacy policy. The Federal Government has very effectively shifted the agenda to the economic model of literacy through its ALLP policy and funding and it has done so with the support of a range of significant 'communities of interest'. Currently the main areas of growth in adult literacy funding are for specific jobseeker programs (such as SIP, the Special Intervention Program) or for workplace initiatives (for example, Workplace English Language and Literacy programs - WELL). With very little funding for adult literacy overall in the States and Territories, the Federal Government is well positioned to ensure adult literacy programs focus on national economic priorities. As McKenna (1994, p.5) recently stated in an article looking at 'the bigger picture': 'The system has been moved to meet broad national goals based on advice from industry ...' To demonstrate this McKenna draws attention to the role of the Federal Government in retaining a large portion of adult literacy funds from the newly instituted Australian National Training Authority (ANTA) to be directed instead to programs for the unemployed administered by the CES, programs in the workplace (WELL) and those conducted by SkillShare. The implication is that the Federal Government is concerned that their funding targets their own specific economic priorities.

The shift from individualism to corporate federalism outlined in this chapter has provided a broader context for the subject of this study – literacy programs for the unemployed. As indicated, it is this focus that is currently seen as a priority by the Federal Government (and other communities of interest) and fits within an economic model of literacy provision. It is important to realise though, that the developments outlined in this chapter may not be

unique to Australia, and that in some ways these developments may mirror those overseas. To complete this chapter, the final section looks briefly at the situation in two countries, the United States and the United Kingdom, both of which have influenced economic and education policy in Australia in the past.

The overseas experience

In the United States it would appear the 'economic model' of adult literacy provision has prevailed for a long time and the preceding discussion on the 'shifts' in adult literacy policy in Australia may hold little comparison with the situation in the United States. The largest providers of adult literacy programs are federal funded and state administered ABE programs which date from the Adult Education Act of 1966. Fingeret (1984) refers to this legislation and indicates its economic implications:

> The wording of the Adult Education Act of 1966 reflects an expectation that literacy will directly affect the ability of adults to secure employment and thereby become more productive citizens (p.17).

Fingeret cites Darkenwald and Valentine (1984) who comment that the Adult Education Act's:

> ... official goals are narrowly utilitarian. The bottom line is employment and adult education is seen not as a right or end in itself, but as a means for training adults to get and keep jobs (Darkenwald & Valentine 1984, p.92).

Harmon (1970, p.236) reported that soon after the Adult Education Act the success of adult basic education programs were being framed in terms of 'positive investments in human resources', based on criteria that included the increased number of people who found jobs, entered training programs and left the welfare rolls (plus also, more voters registered, bank accounts opened and subscriptions to newspapers and magazines).

From the very beginning of large scale adult literacy provision, therefore, the focus has been on economics – jobs, literacy for productivity. Closely related to this provision is the Adult Performance Level (APL), a standardised form of assessment which equates people's literacy levels with occupational status and

provides the data for many alarming statistics about the illiteracy rates of American adults (see for example, Kozol 1985).

More recently workplace literacy has become the focus in the United States, especially in the wake of a series of reports that have indicated the implications for the economy and America's competitiveness if the skills base of the labour force is not improved significantly. These include for example, *America's Choice: High Skills or Low Wages!* (National Center on Education and the Economy 1990) and *Worker Training: Competing in the New international Economy* (Office of Technology Assessment of Congress 1990). These reports mirror to a large extent the concern in Australia for a highly skilled workforce in which literacy has an integral role to play. They also reflect a large number of communities of interest, including government, business and union representatives.

In this very brief and reductionist look at the situation in the United States, a 'shift' in policy of the type outlined earlier in Australia is not so apparent given the general understanding, from the main funding agency, the Federal Government, that adult literacy provision was always meant to have an economic payoff. Certainly though the past decade has seen a heightened corporate awareness of the role of literacy in the maintenance of an internationally competitive economy and to narrow the so called 'job-skills gap' (see Chisman & Campbell 1990).

In the United Kingdom there may be closer parallels with the situation in Australia, though events in the UK appear to be several years ahead. For example, in an adult literacy conference in 1984, adult literacy workers were lamenting the shift to an economic model of literacy effected by the lure of central government funds:

> ... Although some provision for adults in need of very basic education remains, the new initiatives leave little room for the general education of the individual along the humanist model. Indeed, 'training' and 'trainee' have replaced 'education' and 'student'. The carrot is of course money. Faced with severe financial restrictions at local level, the MSC's (Manpower Services Commission) pot of gold is instantly alluring ... (McCaffery 1985, p.25).

Hamilton (1992) refers to the shift in the funding of adult literacy in the eighties 'increasingly directed towards vocational priorities'

which has been in response to changes in the patterns of employment and the industry needs:

> The view of current government policy is that adult education is not worth supporting unless it has vocational outcomes. A lack of basic skills has been identified as a barrier to getting jobs and to updating the training of the existing workforce and this is now the major rationale for supporting ABE (Hamilton 1992).

These views are similar to those of Tuckett (1991), who explains the development of adult education generally in the eighties in Britain and how the 'market economy' of Thatcher's Britain lead to a re-assertion of the vocational/non-vocational divide with only the former being sufficiently government funded. Central government initiatives involving the Manpower Services Commission, and specific programs to provide skills for the unemployed, such as REPLAN and RESTART, appear to pre-date the development in Australia of an active employment strategy and programs such as the Special Intervention Program.

The overseas situation in the United States and in the United Kingdom indicates that, as in Australia currently, the economic model of literacy provision predominates. In the United States this has been the situation for a long time. In the United Kingdom the policy shift to this model from what might be termed 'individualism' closely resembles developments in Australia, except that it happened several years earlier in the UK. It is unlikely, however, that the centralising tendencies of corporate federalism are so clearly articulated in either the USA or the UK, even though similar 'corporate' interests involving government, business and unions are operating.

CHAPTER THREE

Literacy and unemployment: Contesting the dominant discourse

In this chapter several key statements, or axioms, are outlined which represent the dominant discourse on literacy and unemployment. These axioms are featured in a number of official government publications thus representing the views of the Federal Government, and as the previous chapter indicated, in a corporate federalist sense, they are also largely supported and promoted by other major communities of interest, including business, industry and union leaders. They would also be supported by many others in the general community on the grounds that they represent a common sense viewpoint – a normative position. The purpose of this chapter is to indicate that there are alternative readings which challenge or contest this dominant discourse and which may provide a contextual framework for analysing the perspectives of unemployed people referred to literacy programs in Chapters six and seven.

The main axioms discussed in this chapter are:

- that *literacy=jobs*, ie the better a person's literacy skills the greater are the opportunities for getting jobs;
- that people lacking literacy skills are in effect non-functioning adults in society;
- that schooling is largely to blame for people lacking literacy skills and their failure to fit easily into the workforce.

The key axiom though is the first, which requires an examination of the relationship between literacy and jobs

Literacy = jobs

According to the Australian Language and Literacy Policy:

> There is a strong and well-demonstrated relationship between low levels of literacy or English language competence and high levels of unemployment and other forms of social disadvantage (DEET 1991a, p.1)

The ALLP represents the government's most definitive position on the role of literacy in society, and as the above citation makes clear, literacy is strongly linked to unemployment, much in the way that it is often seen to be related to other forms of 'social disadvantage' such as poverty, poor health, crime, homelessness, and other negative aspects of people's social functioning in the community (see also Hartley 1989, DEET 1992a, pp.8-9, Keating 1994, p.92). Moreover, we are often presented with a government view implying not only that there is a strong relationship but that low literacy is a 'causal' factor in unemployment. A Federal Government report for example states that '... low literacy forces many people to become welfare recipients' (DEET 1992b, p.9) and that people with inadequate literacy skills '... have a much greater chance of suffering long term unemployment' (DEET 1992b, p.32).

The basis for this implication would appear to be the fact that low literacy is seen to be a major characteristic of the unemployed. John Dawkins for example, the former Minister responsible for DEET, stated in 1989: 'We know that illiteracy rates are above average amongst prisoners and those on unemployment benefits' (Dawkins 1989). The ALLP also states that 'people with poor language or literacy ... are now disproportionately represented among the unemployed' (DEET 1991b, p.21). To support this perspective in one of their publications DEET provides figures from a survey which indicates the low levels of literacy found among unemployed people in Western Australia:

> A survey conducted by Metropolitan Commonwealth Employment Service (CES) offices in Western Australia in 1989 found that 56% of registered unemployed people had literacy skills below a functional level (DEET 1992a, pp.32-33).

By linking low literacy to unemployment as government publications have done, the key message is that if people want jobs they need to improve their literacy skills and that the greater the

literacy skills the greater will be employment opportunities and economic rewards. This is the discourse of corporate federalism found in the ALLP which makes the case for improving literacy as a means of improving productivity, providing greater economic security and increasing Australia's international competitiveness. In other words, it puts forward the human capital theory – the view that increased education, or in this case more specifically, literacy, equates with economic growth and thus national prosperity.

To most people the literacy = jobs axiom would appear a natural, common sense position to take (see Fairclough 1989 chapter four for a discussion of dominant discourse and common sense). That literacy equals jobs is a particularly compelling argument given the 'corporate' backing to national documents such as the ALLP. Further, it translates into a convenient and cogent argument to present to jobseekers who may be considered to lack literacy skills ie 'You're never going to get a job unless you can read and write better'. Many government publications imply this argument even if they don't state it in quite these terms.

A Report of the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Training (1991), for example, laments the great extent of literacy difficulties in the workplace which manifests itself in such issues as safety, damage to equipment and lost production time (see pp.18-22). Reports on the effects of award restructuring invariably point to the need for a more multi-skilled and educated workforce requiring in particular, improved literacy and communication skills (see for example, Report of the Training Costs Review Committee 1990, Mawer 1991, Baylis, Caldwell & Nussbaum 1991, Prince 1992). Major overseas organisations such as the Overseas Economic Center for Development (OECD) make similar claims to those in Australia on the negative effects of adult 'illiteracy' on economic performance in the Western world (OECD 1992). One essential response to these problems is to provide more workplace basic education programs. Another response, however, is not to employ those who lack these skills.

Certainly there can be little argument that technological changes are affecting many aspects of work and that different types of literacy and communication skills are needed in the contemporary, technologically advanced workplace. The ALLP states that:

> Workers will increasingly be required to manage new technologies and to have interpersonal and team working skills, decision-making and problem-solving strategies, and teaching and learning skills (DEET 1991b, pp.21-22).

Christie (1990) draws attention to the contemporary world which:

> demands a people capable not only of handling the awesome range of print materials now a feature of a technologically advanced society, but also of creating and responding to new ones, for we do keep generating new kinds of writing, new kinds of genres, as a necessary part of generating new knowledge and new ways of thinking (Christie 1990, p.21).

Christie claims that as a result of technology, 'illiterate' people will be effectively 'shut out' from participating fully in community life. She refers to reports indicating the causes of unemployment among young adults (ie Kirby et al 1987) to show that the higher the levels of education (ie literacy), the greater the likelihood of finding work (Christie 1990, p.21). The main target of Christie's message is the schooling system which she believes needs to explicitly teach literacy in a way that more clearly matches the new literacy demands in the workplace.

McCormack (1991) provides additional academic support, related specifically to adult basic education and seen within his pedagogic framing of 'technical literacy'. He provides an outline of the post-Fordist world of work and the trend towards what he refers to as 'discursive' work:

> All these forms of work have been fundamentally engaged in acting in relation to others, rather than acting on physical objects. This form of work has always centred around communication - both speech and writing (McCormack 1991, p.188).

In the Fordist world workers often had little or no need for reading and writing. However, post Fordism, with increasing reliance on computer operations, despite their becoming more user-friendly, results in a shift in worker skills 'to explicit discursively articulated understandings rather than the tacit habitual knowledge of traditional workers' (McCormack 1991, p.189).

Essentially then, the dominant discourse often presented in government publications strongly links low literacy to unemployment and implies that low literacy is a cause of unemployment. These publications, as well as academic studies in Australia and overseas, point to the changing technological world of work and the need for improved literacy and communication skills generally. Those who lack these skills may well be 'shut out'. In fact, according to this argument, not only will there be no jobs for these people, but they won't even be able to undertake the training to remedy the situation, as a recent government report on unemployment indicates:

> Unless certain basic skill requirements are met (eg poor literacy, numeracy, or communication skills) the job seeker is unable to undertake meaningful job search or training to improve his or her job prospects (Committee on Employment Opportunities 1993a, p.118)

Non-functioning adults?

An additional feature of the dominant discourse on literacy and unemployment, which isn't always made explicit, is the general perception of people who lack literacy skills (and who are unemployed) as non functioning adults. If people can't read, write or undertake basic numerical tasks, how can they possibly get or maintain a job? - in fact some might ask, do they deserve a job? How can they contribute economically? And how can they cope in life generally? The report *Words at work: Literacy needs in the workplace* (House of Representatives Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Training 1991) provides an excellent illustration of this general perception. The report devotes a chapter on the impact of what they term 'inadequate' literacy skills. They point for example to the lack of confidence it causes in individuals, their inability to be involved in union activities, and in particular the costs to industry in productivity and in industrial relations terms. It is the section on the impact on society though which provides insights into how these people are often perceived:

> The ability of an individual to function as a member of society is often severely restricted as a result of low literacy skills. People with inadequate literacy and English language skills are denied equal access to economic resources. Because they are less informed their ability to participate in decision making is

markedly reduced in all areas of their lives. For instance, people who cannot read are severely restricted in terms of their rights as citizens. They are unable to act as informed consumers and suffer a greater chance of being cheated in their financial dealings. They are unable to understand legal documents, bank statements, fill in forms for entitlements or complete job applications ... (House of Representatives Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Training 1991, p.25).

Dealings with large government bureaucracies present additional problems for people with inadequate literacy:

> They often find dealings with the Department (of Social Security) bewildering. Much time must therefore be spent by social security staff in explaining the contents of letters to clients. Lack of literacy and English language skills may lead to people not responding to Department of Social Security correspondence and consequently having their income support payments suspended or cancelled (House of Representatives Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Training 1991, p.26).

This dismal picture of people being unable to function in society because they lack literacy skills is mirrored in some overseas studies. A major study of basic education in the United States in the 1970s for example, found low literate people 'desperately hobbled' in their everyday lives, and the descriptions are very similar to the above comments in *Words at Work* (see Mezirow, Darkenwald & Knox 1975, pp.37-8). Recent government publications such as the Federal Government's report on International Literacy Year (DEET 1992a, p.9) continue the same line of argument. This report, for example, highlights the case of a mother who fails to look after her child effectively because she can't read diet instructions. This case study invokes social and economic statements in the text about the high costs of low literacy:

> The limited access to health information which caused Jenny and her baby such distress is only one example of the high costs of low literacy and poverty, low literacy and unemployment, low literacy and homelessness, low literacy and crime. (DEET 1992a, p.9).

The section concludes that people cannot function fully in society if they can't read and write adequately and that literacy rates are

seen as an indicator of the health of a society. The clear but unwritten message is that if we can fix up people's literacy problems then we will go a long way to contributing to solving the country's major economic and social problems as well.

Schools to blame?

The final axiom to be discussed, which follows on from the costs to society of low literacy outlined above, is the focus on the schooling system as an agency to attribute blame.

The recent Green Paper on employment provides a typical perspective on the failings of the school system to provide the necessary skills now required in the workforce:

> The skill base of the Australian workforce relies heavily on the quality of Australian schooling. Many of the basic skills and competencies on which further education and training can be built are acquired at school. There is evidence, however, that the school system may be failing to meet the needs of some young people. The limited data available suggest that between 10 and 20 per cent of students may require some form of intervention to enhance their literacy skills (Committee on Employment Opportunities 1993, p.81).

The Green Paper in fact suggests there may be the case:

> ... for a national survey to provide an authoritative indication of where Australia stands in respect of these basic skills and to point to areas requiring the highest priority for action. (Committee on Employment Opportunities 1993a, p.81)

The White Paper, *Working Nation*, echoes a need for better data on literacy and numeracy in schools and commits the government to provide over $3 million to conduct a national survey (Keating 1994, p.92).

The schooling system therefore shoulders much of the blame for not providing people with the 'basic skills' that are an essential part of the government's skills formation agenda. There is nothing new to these assertions and other recent government reports have highlighted the failures of the schooling system to provide these basic skills within the context of new workplace demands and

skills (see for example, House of Representatives Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Training 1991, pp.27-32). But it is not only in the area of basic skills that schools are found wanting. In preparing children generally for the world of work schools are criticised. The Finn Report (Australian Education Council Review Committee 1991) and the recommendations of the Mayer Committee (1992) are both aimed at ensuring schools in future will provide people with skills more in tune with the needs of industry.

Contesting the dominant discourse

The purpose of this section is not necessarily to refute the above axioms which form much of the dominant discourse on literacy and unemployment, but rather, to present alternative perspectives or positions which inevitably take us into a conflict as distinct from a consensus paradigm. The positioning undertaken in this section indicates that particular dominant group interests are being served within the above axioms, interests which in effect reinforce the status quo in society and may disadvantage marginal groups such as the target group in this study, long term unemployed people considered to be low literate.

This section is structured through responses to several key questions based on the axioms presented in the first section of this chapter. These questions are:

- *Is low literacy a characteristic of the unemployed? And if yes, does low literacy cause unemployment?*
- *Do new technology and changing workplace practices 'shut out' low literate people?*
- *Will an increase in literacy skills lead to greater employment opportunities and economic growth?*
- *Are those people who are considered to be low literate, non functioning members of society?*
- *Are schools really to blame?*

Is low literacy a characteristic of the unemployed? And if yes, does it cause unemployment?

Where's the evidence?

The first question here is basic to the whole argument that literacy is linked in some way to obtaining and maintaining jobs or being unemployed. To most people, it may appear obvious that low literacy will negatively affect people's chances of getting work and thus many of the unemployed, especially the long term unemployed, will be low literate, and the extent of it will be greater than that found in the community generally. John Dawkins (1989) for example, stated 'we know that illiteracy rates are above average' for those on unemployment benefits (and for prisoners also, see page 42 of this chapter), but where is the evidence? The 1989 Western Australian figures cited on page 42 indicating that 56% of registered unemployed were 'below functional level' is meaningless without knowing what is meant by 'functional level' – how was it measured? On what criteria was it based? And what would the level be for the community as a whole based on this criteria? We have little in the way of comparative data, though Wickert's (1989) national survey of adult literacy did touch on the issue with the finding that, 'The mean scores for the unemployed sample were slightly higher than the scores of those in unskilled occupations' (p.40). Findings that do not support an alarmist view of illiteracy or low literacy within the ranks of the unemployed.

A comparative case - prisoner literacy levels

The above-mentioned issues on literacy and the unemployed are similar to the popular perception that prisoners (the other sub group cited by Dawkins, 1989) have above average rates of illiteracy and that this is a causal factor in relation to crime. In the case of prisoners, though, the issue was put to test recently when a survey was conducted in several NSW prisons using the same methodology, survey questionnaire and literacy tasks used in Wickert's national survey (see Black, Rouse & Wickert 1990). The results did in fact conclude that, overall, prisoners performed less well on literacy tasks compared to the general community findings in Wickert's 1989 survey, but the mean differences were relatively small and certainly could not support the popular view of a largely illiterate prisoner population.

The responses to this 1990 prisoner literacy survey have implications for the issue of literacy and unemployed people. This was the most comprehensive literacy survey undertaken in NSW prisons and the findings were cited and published overseas (Barton & Hamilton 1990, ERIC 1991, RaPAL Bulletin No.15, 1991, Sutton 1992), and welcomed by a national criminology expert (Biles 1990), and other reviewers interstate (eg Knight 1990, Tinkler 1991) and yet its findings have been largely ignored by key NSW prison educators. This is likely to be because the findings didn't directly support their interests, which were to show how bad the 'illiteracy' problem was for prisoners and to imply it related to criminal activity, a view which lends itself better to arguments for increased funding from the government for education in prisons. Such a perspective still prevails. A recent newspaper article in the *Sydney Morning Herald* began: 'Men who cannot read or write are 55 times more likely to be imprisoned than men who have studies beyond Year 10 ...' (Lewis 1994). The report then went on to state the case for the importance of education in prisons and for teaching staff to be permanently appointed.

The important point to be made here is that 'rates' or 'levels' of literacy (or illiteracy) have for a long time in a range of national and local contexts been used to support vested interests. Street (1990, p.5), for example, contends that literacy rates are 'counters in a political game over resources: if campaigners can inflate the figures then the public will be shocked and funds will be forthcoming from embarrassed governments ....' which would appear to be the case in the above NSW prison education context.

In whose interests?

It is necessary therefore to ask, whenever alarmist literacy rates are cited, in whose interests is this? Returning to the issue of low literacy and the unemployed, we need to consider whose interests are at stake when John Dawkins or a government publication laments the lack of literacy skills within the ranks of the unemployed. It could be argued that, through highlighting the difficulties low literate people face in trying to get jobs, especially in the context of increasingly technologically advanced, post Fordist workplaces, the government is effectively shifting their responsibility for the unemployed to the unemployed themselves. The argument becomes, as illustrated in the first section of this

chapter, that people can't get jobs because their literacy skills don't match those required in the contemporary workplace.

Understandably the government would rather promote this perspective, which shifts responsibility for unemployment to a deficiency in individual jobseekers, rather than to acknowledge that the jobs just are not there for a number of structural reasons built in to a capitalist economy which is increasingly linked to larger international market forces. High unemployment is a politically sensitive issue for any government. Having shifted the debate to lack of skills on the part of the unemployed, one of the government's major policy initiatives to combat high rates of unemployment is then in the area of labour market training and literacy programs (under the ALLP). Thus the government is seen to be active in addressing unemployment, especially long term unemployment. This is a perspective outlined by Street who states:

> Governments have a tendency to blame the victims at a time of high unemployment and 'illiteracy' is one convenient way of shifting debate away from lack of jobs and onto people's own supposed lack of fitness for work (Street 1990, p.6)

The nature of literacy, the fact that it has been a broad and contentious concept to define, has resulted in its manipulation to serve particular interest groups.

The new literacy studies

Our understandings of literacy have developed considerably over the past decade, reflecting in large part the influence of ethnographic and anthropological studies. Within what is known as 'the new literacy studies' (see Gee 1990, Street 1993, pp.1-21) researchers no longer see literacy as a neutral set of transferable skills that we all possess to some degree and which can be measured accurately (referred to as the 'autonomous' model of literacy by Street 1984). Instead, literacy is seen to vary according to its use in different social contexts (which Street terms an 'ideological' model). Some researchers refer to literacies or literacy practices to more accurately explain this context dependent nature of literacy (eg Street 1990, Barton 1991, 1994).

Recent state and national curriculum frameworks developed in Australia indicate that literacy needs and skills differ according to different regions, domains or aspects within society (McCormack 1991, STB & DFE 1992, ACTRAC 1993). It's a concept that various interest groups and government and non government bodies have problems grappling with because literacy becomes so much more complex and difficult to manipulate when seen in this way. They want to be able to measure literacy ability along a single dimension so that specific populations 'in need' can be identified, for example, jobseekers with only 'fundamental literacy skills' or 'less than social proficiency', categories identified in the ALLP (DEET 1991, p.48).

It was for these reasons that the NSW prisoner literacy survey (Black et al 1990) has not been well received by some prison educators. The survey found, for example, that on a task such as filling in a job application form, prisoners had considerable difficulty compared to the general adult population in Wickert's (1989) survey, but on a task such as identifying dosage instructions on a pharmaceutical package, prisoners performed as well if not better. Both tasks require literacy ability, and we can speculate on the reasons for the different results, but it demonstrates context dependency and makes the issue of determining prisoner literacy 'levels' a complex matter.

Political expediency rules

Governments and various interest groups have managed largely to bypass with impunity these broader understandings of literacy held by researchers and professional educators. DEET for example, as indicated previously in this section, has linked the term low literacy to unemployment, crime, homelessness and poverty. The statement in the ALLP that 'there is a strong relationship between low levels of literacy and high levels of unemployment and other forms of social disadvantage' (DEET 1991a, p.1), has been reiterated by Federal Government bureaucrats in major literacy forums (eg Pratt 1994a, 1994b) and appears in other major government policy documents (see *Working Nation* - Keating 1994, p.92) but at no time has it been found necessary to explain what is meant by 'low levels of literacy' or to demonstrate this 'strong relationship'. It is apparently taken for granted and accepted. When DEET states that low literacy 'forces' many people to become welfare recipients, the government is effectively shifting responsibility for this problem

to those individuals who are both welfare recipients and considered to have low levels of literacy (whatever this may mean) and one key element to the remedy presented by the government, therefore, will be in improving their literacy levels.

Do new technology and changing workplace practices 'shut out' low literate people?

There can be no argument about the direction that workplaces are going in the post-Fordist era. The changing communication patterns alluded to in the ALLP and by Christie and McCormack in the previous section are in the process of happening. There are many specific examples of industries and enterprises adopting less hierarchical organisational structures and cooperative work in teams which make different language and literacy demands on workers (eg Baylis et al 1991) and which would constitute more of the 'discursive' work (ie engaging in relation to others rather than acting on physical objects) to which McCormack (1991, p.188) refers. The issue here though is whether these changes will, in Christie's terms, 'shut out' people in the way she predicts due to new language and literacy demands, and whether as a consequence many people will find themselves both unemployed and unemployable.

It depends on the occupation

There are no clear answers and the situation is complex. One of the problems with the scenarios presented within this dominant discourse on the need for a more skilled workforce is the assumption that a more skilled workforce, which by definition suggests higher order literacy competence, is required in all work contexts. Rubenson for example, although writing from a North American perspective, states:

> Judging from the general discussion (on) the impact of the new technology, one can easily get the impression that all new jobs are in the high technology area (Rubenson 1989, p.391).

Following discussion of the relationship between new technology and skill levels, he states that the net employment effects of the new technology are very difficult to estimate, but, in his summing

up points he does state that 'labour market forecasts predict that the majority of jobs in the next ten years will be in low skill areas' (p.391).

In Australia, also, the forecasts for growth in occupational skills are mixed as the Federal Government's report *Australia's workforce in the Year 2001* (DEET 1991c) indicates:

> An important theme on the Government's strategy on education and training is that Australia needs a more skilled workforce. Implicit in this theme is that skilled occupations will grow at a faster rate than unskilled occupations. This supposition, however, is by no means universally accepted. It is possible to point to technological innovations, such as robotics, displacing skilled workers. Other developments, such as the growth in the hospitality industry, are also likely to favour less skilled workers (DEET 1991c, p.20).

While the prospects for unskilled occupations overall 'are relatively poor':

> ...This does not mean that all unskilled occupations have poor prospects, but rather that on balance lowly skilled occupations are expected to grow less quickly than the overall workforce (DEET 1991c, p.32).

The report indicates that there is considerable variation across occupational sectors, and the picture presented, while not optimistic in relation to unskilled work, doesn't suggest that unskilled workers will be 'shut out'. However, the situation facing migrants with poor English communication skills, especially recent migrants, is generally considered poor because they tend to be overrepresented in the slower growing unskilled labouring occupations (p.93).

Luke (1992) also draws attention to the mix of Fordist and post-Fordist enterprises which continue to co-exist and how occupational sectors and sites of work are developing differentially in relation to the level of skills required. He concludes:

> Taken together, these trends suggest an economic environment where some will require higher levels of literate competence in parts of the expanding service and information sectors, but many, particularly those in lower paying and part time work,

will require repetitive and deskilled textual competence (Luke 1992, p.9).

Lankshear (1991) earlier indicated that the literacy for the new post-industrial semi skilled worker:

> ... is very much a 'following' or 'response-to-instructions' form of literacy. There is no serious demand for interpretation, evaluation, or other 'higher order' processes involving print. It is a literacy for *carrying out* tasks rather than conceiving or framing them. Whether the work tasks are themselves acts of using print symbols (eg entering data, typing copy) or performing operations in accordance with written instructions, they are typically routine and repetitive – calling, at best, for mechanical accuracy. The literacy required by the semi-skilled post-industrial worker is indeed basic (Lankshear 1991, p.212).

A different and perhaps more balanced picture therefore is presented of the relative roles of skilled and unskilled work over the next few years at least. Certainly the idea that there is an overall and sudden shift to higher skilled work at the expense of low skilled work due to influence of new technology and changes in workplace practices is unsubstantiated. It also makes it hard to argue that people can't get jobs in today's climate because they lack skills. Explanations for high unemployment are more likely to be found in structural factors to do with global economies.

Screening theory

Other researchers such as Levine (1986) and Street (1990) explain that many work roles require minimal literacy, and even those that might be classified 'skilled' can often be taught on the job fairly easily. Nevertheless, being able to perform in a job is a different matter to actually being able to get a job, which seems to be where literacy competence plays a major role.

In recruiting for a job, employers often demand a level of skills which might be expressed in terms of years of formal schooling, qualifications or literacy competence, which are far in excess of those required in the job. As Luke explains:

> ... even where the literate requirements of particular workplaces are declining, a tighter job market will stress higher levels of academic and skill credentialling as a benchmark for access to employment (Luke 1992, p.11).

As Hamilton and Davies (1990) explain in their UK study of *Written communication barriers to employment*, the problem for many jobseekers, which causes them much frustration, is that they apply the need for skills or literacy competence in relation to their 'job goal', and not the procedures to get the job (see Hamilton & Davies 1990, p.27). They often believe they have the skills to do the job based on their knowledge of the job requirements and their previous work experience, but they can't get the jobs because there are often other agendas operating:

> Interviewees also raised the issue of how difficulties with written communication may be used by employers to filter people out of job or training opportunities who are deemed unsuitable in other ways (Hamilton & Davies 1990, p.28).

It is this filtering out, or screening, for reasons other than whether people can cope with the skill demands of the job, that some researchers have focussed on as the key element in the ever increasing job credentials. Street (1990) for example, states:

> Researchers also point out that the literacy tests which firms develop for prospective employees may have nothing to do with the literacy skills required on the job: their function is to screen out certain social groups and types, not to determine whether the level of literacy matches that of the tasks required. Some employers, for instance, have the somewhat mythical belief that employees who have learnt literacy are less likely to be antagonistic to new technology, computers etc ... (Street 1990, p.6).

This process is known as screening theory, the notion that employers are looking primarily for particular personal attributes in their prospective workers:

> What employers are looking for are personal attributes like cognitive skills, personality traits such as self-reliance, achievement, drive, compliance with organisational rules and trainability. The theory postulates that employers faced with a selection problem treat educational qualifications as a

> screening device to distinguish among new workers in terms of personality attributes (Rubenson, 1991, p.389).

Within an historical context, screening theory shouldn't be a surprise – it is an extension of what some educational historians have shown in research over the past two decades, that mass public schooling originated in newly industrialised countries in the mid/late nineteenth century essentially to develop in future workers the appropriate traits and attitudes required by industry (ie the correspondence theory – see Bowles and Gintis 1976). In the nineteenth century, 'schooled' workers were found to be more 'productive', by which it was meant they were less disruptive, more skilled, orderly and disciplined, punctual and moral (see also Graff 1979, 1982). The late twentieth century workplace demands different personality traits (as indicated above by Rubenson), but nevertheless the same principle applies – the higher the level of education the more 'productive' workers are considered to be in terms of their attitudes and application to work.

Will an increase in literacy skills lead to greater employment opportunities and increased productivity and economic growth?

It remains in this section to look at the broader issue of the links between increasing literacy skills and employment opportunities within the human capital model which equates an increase in skills with economic growth. The human capital model is at the root of current education and training policy in Australia today. An increase in the skills base of the workforce or potential workforce is seen as the answer to Australia's competitiveness and will lead to a growth economy and hence jobs. This view underpins all major government publications promoting the development of a more skilled workforce, such as *Skills for Australia*, the *Finn Report* and the ALLP. Luke (1992, 1993) however, challenges this and concludes: 'The problem with the human capital model is quite simple: it doesn't appear to work' (Luke 1993 p.20).

Luke refers to the situation in the United States, Canada and Britain in which there has been a huge investment in education and training in recent years and the education levels of the population have increased, but this hasn't been reflected in their economic returns:

> Such extensive training and credentialling schemes have not 'solved' nor even insulated these or other countries from structural economic problems, many of which are shared by Australian and other economies (Luke 1992, p.7).

Luke explains some of the complex issues involving workplace practices, and the extent to which some occupational areas are multiskilling but others are de-skilling. He concludes:

> ... it is clear that simple axioms about the economic effects of increased literacy levels are, at best, dependent on the sector in question and, at worst, misleading representations of general, more global trends. There is no across-the-board connection between increased work literacy skill levels and economic productivity (Luke 1992, pp. 10-11).

Returning to a theme outlined earlier in this chapter, Luke warns against the blame-the-victims mentality which can result from belief in the human capital model:

> Educators at all levels need to avoid buying into approaches to literacy that displace structural economic problems from larger societal, corporate and governmental systems onto individual human subjects, which locate the problems with the economy in individual's skill-deficits, failures of character, impoverished morals and so forth (Luke 1992, p.12).

Belief in literacy's magical powers

Despite the warnings Luke provides, literacy is often presented as a cure-all, as having magical powers. We find for example, John Dawkins stating:

> For Australians, literacy is the difference between competing in the international market with a well-trained workforce – and stagnation (ILY 1991a).

And Julian Disney, former President of the Australian Council of Social Service (ACOSS), stated:

> Australia's a lucky country, but too many people lack the key to being lucky. Literacy is that key (DEET 1992a, p.9).

Most importantly, however, belief in the power of literacy extends to those people marginalised in terms of unemployment and social disadvantage. As outlined earlier, the government claims low literacy causes many aspects of people's disadvantage, and this is believed by many of those so labelled because they've been 'schooled' into thinking this. Blame-the-victim strategies work because the victims accept the blame, they accept that they don't deserve better because they don't have the 'basics', literacy (and numeracy). Consider for example, a newspaper series in the *Sydney Morning Herald* by Steketee (1993) on *Australia's underclass*. In one part of this series Steketee provides a case study focusing on Gloria Swift and her son, Michael and he explains:

> The family is part of a debilitating cycle of illiteracy and unemployment: it is a cycle that is passing from generation to generation ... Swift's 19-year old son, Michael, has been unable to hold down a job since leaving school at 14. She describes him as "a bum" with "no hope" of getting a job, although she recently persuaded him to take literacy classes ... Gloria began attending classes last October, and now has a goal as a result of taking this step. Learning to read will be "a slow process", but she aims to get back into the workforce for the first time in 20 years ...

Luke's exposé of the human capital model is at odds with the prevailing belief at all levels of society that increasing literacy ability will bring with it rewards, and especially economic rewards, as the above case of Gloria and her son Michael indicates. Gloria and Michael blame themselves and their inability to learn basic literacy skills for their current life circumstances (though sometimes they are persuaded that the school system has let them down, which will be looked at later). They aren't angry with the government or anyone else because they can't get jobs. They accept the somewhat simplistic notion that things have changed and that literacy now assumes more importance than ever and prevents them from getting a job:

> "You had to fill out forms in those days, but they weren't as complicated as they are now," she says. "You could get by, but these days you can't get by if you can't read. Now the employer says you're stupid if you can't read ... "

And as Gloria says of her son Michael:

> 'He's on the dole ... To me as far as I'm concerned, he's a bum; that's how I look at it. He's got no hope of getting a job because he hasn't got the skills behind him. No employer is going to hire him without skills ... '

Literacy can be seen, therefore, as providing an ideal gatekeeping role in society. As a selective mechanism it is ensuring that the balance in the distribution of society's rewards remains relatively unchanged – it serves the interests of the status quo. Unemployed people such as Gloria and Michael accept a cultural hegemony which identifies levels of education, and literacy ability in particular, as the criteria for their improved life circumstances. At an academic level Luke and others may critique the human capital model and provide evidence that where it has been applied it has not remedied economic or social problems. But still the myth pervades the general community, fuelled by government, corporate interests and the media.

Are those people who are considered to be low literate , non-functioning members of society?

Early in this chapter several passages were cited from the government publication *Words at Work* to indicate generally the dominant discourse on how low literate adults are perceived in official circles. These adults were seen to be incapable of leading productive lives, either in an economic or social sense. The *Sydney Morning Herald* article on Sydney's underclass (Steketee 1993) would appear to support this version.

For example, this story includes the almost obligatory account of how difficult it is for people to go shopping if they can't read: 'A food co-op next to the literacy centre puts pictures on tins of no-name products to avoid confusion' (Steketee 1993). Further, comments from Gloria and Michael seem to support that they might see themselves as largely non-functioning (he's 'a bum' with 'no hope'), although Gloria illustrates some resistance: 'I'm not stupid; I've got a brain and can do the job'. This sort of reporting falls within the discourse site of the 'popular media' in which 'illiterates' are constructed, often through exaggeration and misleading

characterisations, to suit particular political and social interests which are to place responsibility for literacy problems squarely with the individuals themselves. As Wickert (1993 p.31) states:

> Here the discourse of the object, the illiterate, reinforces a dominant construction of adult illiterates as ineducable, unemployable, and in human capital terms, unproductive ...

Unfortunately the lives of low-literate people haven't been researched in any great depth, but recent ethnographic studies, in particular those which focus on people 'who are not literacy students', have shown an alternative perspective. When the focus is on students, the construction of 'the poor illiterate' is often reinforced because these are people who may feel they are not coping (which is why they are attending classes). As some of the following research indicates, many people who might be considered low literate, are in fact coping with their lives very well.

Levine (1982 p.264), for example, makes the important point that it is 'access' to skills and information that is the key, and that just because a person cannot 'independently' undertake tasks requiring literacy doesn't mean they can't function effectively if they have support from others. This view is shared by other literacy researchers such as St John Hunter (1987), Fingeret (1983) and Heath (1983). Fingeret, for example, showed that many 'illiterate' people use social networks of friends and family to function effectively and that this may become a reciprocal relationship with other duties or services being exchanged for help with literacy tasks. Heath (1983) demonstrated that literacy practices vary in different communities and that, for example, in some communities it is the cultural norm to share a literacy event, such as reading a newspaper. It isn't necessary, therefore, or expected, that everyone be able to independently undertake this task.

Ethnographic research by Weinstein-Shr (1993) has shown the importance of kinship groups to enable Hmong refugees in Philadelphia to function effectively. Shuman (1993), working with urban adolescents demonstrated that writing very often is a collaborative effort, not individual. Baynham (1993) highlights the role of community interpreters and mediators that enable others to function effectively within particular literacy practices or events as well as the active role that may be taken by non-literate participants. A small NSW study of low-literate prisoners (Black 1989, 1990,) found that many prisoners could function quite

effectively with some help, and it did not necessarily result in any shame. Research, and especially ethnographic research in this area, is still quite limited, but it is clear that perspectives that see people 'desperately hobbled' in their ability to function in society because of a perceived lack of literacy skills are reductionist and can be challenged. Mikulecky (1990 p.29) for example, in summarising the implications of the social context studies undertaken by Fingeret and Heath, states:

> It is inappropriate and inaccurate to assume that low literate adults are helpless in the face of generally high national literacy demands.

Are schools to blame?

This question is incidental to the main issues under discussion here and will therefore be covered only briefly. From some of the documentation already cited (eg Committee on Employment Opportunities 1993a) it is clear that while it serves the interests of governments and some dominant groups in society to focus responsibility for unemployment onto individuals who lack particular skills, it is also common to blame schools for not teaching these skills properly. Hence schools are sometimes targetted and blamed for the unemployment situation or for low productivity or for the nation's lack of international competitiveness.

There is little new in blaming schools for many of society's problems. Periodically, and usually during bad economic times, schools are identified for not teaching the 'basics' or that educational standards have fallen (see Black 1994 for an overview of 'back to basics' and Freebody & Welch 1993 for a more detailed picture). The following citation from Lankshear succinctly explains an alternative reading of the dominant discourse on the role of schools, basic skills, the issue of unemployment and who should be blamed:

> During the current crisis within a number of capitalist economies, large scale illiteracy and perceived weaknesses in basic literacy have helped centre debate around the idea of unemployability instead of around the facts of economic restructuring. And so what is precisely a structural question has been distorted and defined as a problem with educational standards, failure to teach the basics, and other weaknesses

> within schooling itself. The attack here on schooling nicely complements 'blame-the-victim' reasoning directed at individuals and groups, so far as promoting elite interests are concerned. 'Solutions' are sought within education rather than within the economy. This clearly serves the interests of those who benefit from the economic restructuring that is going on at present, and undermines the interests of those whose failure to obtain non-existent jobs is blamed on their unemployability. Within this distortion of economic and social reality, schools - like individuals - become to some extent a victim: blamed for problems originating in the economic structure. (Lankshear with Lawler 1987, p.144).

Conclusions

In this chapter some of the key axioms that make up the dominant discourse outlined in various government publications on literacy and unemployment have been critiqued. The alternative positions presented stand in contrast to what have become popular community perceptions about the unemployed. Few commentators in the print media, for example, question the importance of literacy in getting a job or in undertaking job training. Few unemployed people appear to question government officials whose main response to unemployment is to send them to training programs to improve their literacy skills. Or at least that appears to be the case based on newspaper articles such the one featuring Gloria and her son Michael. It remains for later chapters in this report to explore the situation as seen from the point of view of CES clients themselves.

In responding to the dominant discourse, a number of basic questions have been posed which challenge this discourse. These questions remain unanswered. Purveyors of the dominant discourse need to explain on what basis they can claim that there is a strong relationship between low literacy and unemployment and other forms of social disadvantage.

However, first, some valid data should be provided to indicate if in fact 'low levels of literacy' are a characteristic of the unemployed, and if it is, then it will need to be shown how low literacy 'causes' unemployment, because a characteristic isn't necessarily a causal factor. Many prisoners, for example, have tattoos, but do tattoos

'cause' crime? The link between literacy ability and unemployment needs to be examined carefully.

Other issues such as the role and rate of the introduction of new technology and workplace practices and their relationship to literacy ability need to be examined in greater detail. Finally, the issue of whose interests are at stake needs to be asked constantly.

This chapter has indicated that it is in the interests of governments and other corporate groups to pursue a policy aimed at narrowing the so called 'jobs-skills gap' as a response to unemployment, because this deflects attention from the broader structural economic and international market forces that cause unemployment. It focusses attention instead on the skill deficiencies of those who are unemployed.

If literacy programs for the unemployed are seen within this perspective, then these programs become less the result of a benevolent government anxious to assist the unemployed back to work, and more a cynical political exercise to buy time during poor economic times and to demonstrate that government action is being undertaken to help the unemployed. Literacy programs for the unemployed therefore are contentious and 'political', especially if they involve nonvoluntary participants.

CHAPTER FOUR

Literacy programs for the unemployed: Some critical reflections

This chapter provides a more detailed context for the main focus of this study on the perspectives of CES clients referred to literacy programs. The chapter covers Commonwealth initiatives and guidelines for the development of literacy programs for unemployed people, and reports and critiques of some programs and issues that have arisen to date. There are also some comparative data from an interstate and overseas literacy program for the unemployed.

Beginning with the ALLP

As indicated in the introduction to this study, it was the Federal Government's White Paper on language and literacy (ALLP) that heralded the beginning of a national effort to provide language, literacy and numeracy programs for unemployed people. Jobseekers 'with fundamental literacy difficulties' were to be sent to TAFE and adult community providers for assistance (see DEET 1991a, p 8). Provision mainly came under the Special Intervention Program (SIP) administered by the CES, though from late 1992 and for all of 1993 in NSW, ALLP funds were provided directly to NSW TAFE for jobseeker programs. The objectives of these adult literacy funds were expressed as follows:

> ... the enhancement of access to labour market and further education and training for individuals and groups with inadequate literacy skills for this purpose (*Draft DEET Administrative Guidelines for Adult Literacy Funds* 1992).

Jobseekers eligible for these programs were primarily those considered long term unemployed (ie over one year) and priority was given to Newstart clients.

The more recent White Paper on employment and growth (*Working Nation*, Keating 1994) changes slightly the dimensions of the SIP in that the major element of the new CES case management will be the

identification of 'barriers' to employment. Thus, 'jobseekers with significant barriers to accessing employment or vocational training' (*Jobseekers and the White Paper* 1994) are now identified as the target group. Significantly also, eligibility now extends to:

> all jobseekers who are identified as being at high risk of becoming long term unemployed, as well as those jobseekers who have been registered unemployed for over 12 months (*Jobseekers and the White Paper* 1994).

The ALAN (Adult Literacy and Numeracy) scales and the ILCM (Interim Literacy Course Matrix)

DEET also uses the term 'jobseekers with less than minimal social proficiency' to describe the target group qualifying for assistance under its literacy funding. This labelling is confusing, because in other parts of the ALLP reference is made to people with 'fundamental' literacy difficulties, 'poor' literacy, 'inadequate' literacy, 'insufficient' literacy, and those who do not possess 'effective' literacy (DEET 1991a&b). The labelling and the determination of a particular literacy level is clearly problematic. Originally it was DEET's intention to determine those with 'less than minimal social proficiency' through use of the newly developed ALAN assessment scales (Griffin & Forwood 1991), and early draft DEET administrative guidelines refer to:

> Jobseekers who do not have Level C proficiency on both the reading and writing elements of the Adult Literacy and Numeracy (ALAN) scales will be referred to state adult literacy providers (*Draft Administrative Guidelines for Adult Literacy Funds* 1992).

The ALAN scales, however, had not at this stage been evaluated and concerns about its use were expressed from adult literacy personnel in the various States and Territories (see ACAL 1992) which resulted in the development instead of the Interim Literacy Course Matrix (the ILCM - see DEET 1992c), which shifted the debate from the levels of proficiency of individual jobseekers to the most appropriate type of provision the jobseekers required. The majority of the CES clients referred to literacy classes will fall into the 1.1 or 2.1 category on the ILCM (See Appendix 1).

CES referral procedures

The referral procedures undertaken by the CES in sending clients to TAFE are outlined here in some detail because interviews with CES clients in later chapters focus a lot on referral issues. The following procedures applied:

> The CES will, in discussion with the client, assess the client's employability and whether literacy appears to be a barrier to employment. They will then refer the client with a standard proforma letter identifying the client to a state adult literacy provider for an assessment.
>
> The adult literacy provider written assessment should indicate the client's needs for literacy training on the ILCM and recommend any appropriate learning arrangement ...
>
> On receipt of the assessment and recommendation the CES will consider, in consultation, whether the client should undertake a literacy course. Arrangements can then be made for placement with the literacy provider ... (*Administrative guidelines for adult literacy funds to TAFE and community providers* 1992)

Two main types of literacy provision for jobseekers

Although all CES referred clients participating in literacy programs under ALLP funding fall within the 1.1 or 2.1 ILCM category, there have been two main types of programs conducted:

1) Under the SIP program as it operated for most of NSW in 1991 and up to mid 1992, the CES provided tender specifications for courses it wanted to conduct and TAFE, along with other providers, responded with submissions for these courses. The local DEET CES area determined the specifications for the courses according to what they perceived were the needs of CES clients in their area. Thus, in the area to the west of Sydney which is the site for this study, DEET specified target groups such as those with non English speaking backgrounds, and also the course content and expected outcomes. Most of these courses were full time for up to one semester, in fact the first course the local TAFE college successfully tendered for was for 30 hours per week face to face teaching. Subsequent tenders in this area were for 20 hours per

week. This provision is referred to as SIP provision in the following sections in this chapter.

2) From mid 1992 to the end of 1993 the Commonwealth provided funding direct to the State and Territory TAFE and major adult community education providers for jobseeker literacy programs. The same CES client referral guidelines were followed, except that it was agreed that TAFE and some community colleges would be the providers, and so there were no tendering or course specifications provided by DEET. CES clients were referred instead to existing TAFE/community college literacy programs, most of which were part time. Thus, typically, CES clients participated in small group RAWFA (Reading and Writing for Adults) classes or Maths Workshop classes for up to six hours a week.

From the beginning of 1994 the direct ALLP funding of TAFE and community college providers ceased and subsequent funding has been under the SIP program and subject to tendering arrangements within DEET regional areas.

Some critical reflections on jobseeker programs

This section outlines some criticisms by several teaching staff at a TAFE college following the completion of three SIP tendered programs in 1991-92. It is not intended to be an evaluation of the courses but a selection of critical comments covering some key aspects of the program. In each case the program conducted was the accredited NSW TAFE Certificate in Adult Basic Education (CABE) course. The data presented in this section is based on:

- the transcription of a recorded interview with the coordinator (Edd) of the first SIP program
- a recording of a meeting of CABE teachers at the conclusion of the final course
- details from the unpublished *Interim Report* for this report (Black 1992)
- an article published in the *Good Practice in Australian Adult Literacy and Basic Education* on 'Adapting curriculum to meet the needs of SIP' (Quill & Finch 1993, pp.14-16)

Selecting the students

The first SIP course was fraught with problems. Because it was the first course offered under SIP by the local CES office and the first conducted by the TAFE college, the structures and mechanisms were not in place and there wasn't the time available to plan properly. Thus the course had to be conducted 'on the run':

> Tenders were called for at short notice and courses were expected to start within a few weeks. Assessment of potential students therefore had to be completed under pressure and there was almost no time for setting up course essentials such as accommodation and teachers (Quill & Finch 1993 p.14).

The students themselves were totally unprepared, especially for the first course:

> ... none of them had been told why they were being brought into an interview ... none of them knew why they were there ... CES just pulled them in and said 'come in you've got to have an interview about your reading and writing.' They had no idea ... (Edd).

Setting up the course

Because the course had to be tendered for, costs had to be kept to the minimum in order to be competitive. As Edd explains, the tender was 'chopped to the bare bones' by the Labour Market Programs (LMP) officer at TAFE:

> 'Don't even think about putting in for this, you won't get it' ... that's why we didn't have any computers accessible ... that's why we didn't have a whole lot of equipment ... they wouldn't even let me hire them (computers) ... (Edd).

The purpose of the course

The issue of jobs, and how this course related to getting jobs clearly had to be addressed. The manager of the CES, a former teacher, had an understanding that quick fixes were unlikely. His view, according to Edd, was:

> ... for these people to come out of it with some raised self esteem, so that they might feel that they can go for a job with a bit more confidence ...

For the teaching staff, at least for the first SIP course, jobs were also not a high priority based on their understanding of the needs of the students:

> No, they didn't see a job at the end of it ... I never talked about jobs at the end ... I said things like, we will try and give you a few skills that will make it maybe a bit easier for you to get out there in the job market ... We might be able to do things like have a resume prepared for you, something that looks good ... very low key (Edd).

For some students, jobs were inappropriate anyway. One of the students, for example, was semi-retired and really not fit for work:

> One of them particularly, the one that had a heart attack because he was so stressed out by the whole course, he wasn't interested in working. The reason he came to the course was because the CES told him he had to. But what he got out of it was a much better relationship in terms of literacy, with his grandchildren, which became really important to him ... So he was actually able to read stories to his grandkids and do schoolwork stuff with them ... (Edd).

On the other hand in one of the other SIP courses (for NESB clients) the students were very job-oriented to the extent that they couldn't see the point of doing course electives such as history which were not directly related to jobs:

> (it) went against the immediacy ... They're immediate need was to get a job OK, and it's not a pressing thing, their understanding of Australian society (group discussion).

This student group wanted specific job-oriented assistance and one aspect of the course, a video session of themselves in an interview situation, was particularly popular. For this group, unlike the first SIP group, the focus had to remain on jobs:

> ... Teachers had to act positively towards students being away for job interviews. They had to work with the self esteem of the

> whole group if someone got a job as reduced numbers changed the group dynamics and everyone felt down since they were the ones who didn't get a job. We found that we were spending lots of time boosting others up and talking about getting jobs; constantly leaving the curriculum, leaving the issue currently under discussion (Quill & Finch 1993 p.15).

The orientation phase

To go from long term unemployment with the absence of regulating work routines to a full time course of 20 to 30 hours per week was a strain for many participants:

> That thing of coming in, in a learning situation where you're feeling the pressure of other people around you ... you've got a teacher out in front sort of pushing you along, that's extremely stressful, and very tiring ... (Edd).

Full time SIP courses of this type required a changed approach to teaching:

> It was a matter for everyone of pulling back and being relaxed about what people were doing, and not putting on pressure, and not standing out the front being a full bore teacher. It was very much more, sit down and have a chat for an hour before you actually say, 'right, let's get into this'. They had so much to talk through that SIP group ... and everyone brought up different things, so there was always different stuff (Edd).

It was due to the strains and stresses of participating in a full time basic education course that counselling services available at the college became an important component of the courses.

Was it worth the effort?

There were some very positive outcomes for many students (see Quill & Finch 1993), but there were also, as shown above, some negative aspects. Edd, the coordinator of the first, and admittedly the most difficult SIP group, had reservations about the value of the exercise:

> I personally don't think so [that it was worth the effort] I think the whole thing of a 20 week course is misleading, I really do. Unless we can get students ... if we can get students with very careful selection procedures and put them through a proper CABE selection procedure, then it might be a valuable exercise, but I think the fact that we're always pressured to assess, we never assess thoroughly and properly, is really important, and for that reason they're a waste of time. I don't think the ALLP (ie the non-tendered mainstream classes) are, however. I think that's tapping into a real need, where I think the SIP stuff taps into what the CES see as the needs rather than what the students see as the needs ... (Edd).

Perhaps the most unfortunate aspect of this critique is that for many people this was their first learning experience since leaving school and it might be their last:

> Rather than being given the chance to stage themselves into it, to see whether in fact it's what they want to do, and whether they perceive themselves developing any long term goals out of it, they get thrown into it, don't like it because of whatever, some kind of shock to the system, and so they drop out, and they're people who will never come back ... They've been, you know, they've obviously not had real good educational experiences anyway, they've got hit with this thing, and we're never going to get them, they're really lost to the system forever I would reckon. I don't reckon any of these people are ever going to come back ... the ones that have dropped out ... (Edd).

Critical 'snapshots' such as these are disturbing and reflect badly on literacy provision for jobseekers. It needs to be remembered, however, that the courses under discussion were the first undertaken in the area and indicate some initial adjustment problems. The issues were new for all concerned – the CES, TAFE and the students.

A comparative picture

Two other programs are presented here which feature some of the issues and concerns expressed in the above Sydney programs.

First, a Victorian (Australia) report of a SIP literacy program for unemployed youth (Carter 1993) indicates, as with the above, that these programs represent a major change in the provision of literacy programs. This is due to the tendering for funds which provides 'less opportunity for flexibility in terms of program development', compulsory attendance and full time courses. The report highlights the despair that some teachers felt about teaching students who didn't want to be there, and questions whether in fact this type of provision is in the best interests of the group it seeks to target.

Second, is the example of a basic education program in the town of Consett in the UK (Holmes & Storrie 1985) established to cater for people unemployed through the closure of the local steel mill. The report of this program provides some insights and implications for the Australian context of literacy programs for the unemployed. The British Steel Corporation (BSC) provided funds for the course (and other retraining programs) as part of a benefit scheme for redundant workers. There was no compulsion for ex workers to participate, but there were financial incentives (up to 100% of previous earnings for one year if they participated). The study does not present a story of success, though there many positive aspects, rather, it outlines some of the crucial issues. Many participants for example, participated simply for the money. The funding body, the BSC regarded the course as training for future work, but teachers of the course had a different perspective, as did the students:

> The tutors were unwilling to subscribe to the notion that the course would lead to opportunities for employment, and therefore sought to introduce and broaden leisure interests for the students. While there is evidence that a number of students did respond positively to this offering of liberal education, (on the whole however), the students were motivated by the desire to improve their general education, to acquire skills relevant to further education and employment, and to increase their income from make-up pay. Time and flexibility to negotiate some reconciliation of these aims was not available ... (Holmes & Storrie 1985, p.viii).

For some workers, the whole program was a cynical exercise:

> Of course the blokes are just doing the retraining courses for the money, everybody concerned knows that, but there's a big pretence from the institutions that they are retraining people for work. The BSC have said that they wouldn't consider putting anyone on a course if there wasn't the prospect of a job at the end of it and if there's any doubt about the validity of courses they ask the computer at Consett dole. Jesus, you don't have to ask a bloody computer where the work is in Consett, there isn't any. They are taking additional teachers off the dole to retrain us, they are retraining plumbers to be brickies and brickies to be plumbers and they still pretend it's retraining for work (Holmes & Storrie 1985, p.61).

Such views raise issues for SIP and ALLP programs in Australia. How many CES clients are participating in literacy programs because if they didn't they would have their allowances cut off? To what extent are literacy programs a genuine attempt to prepare people for work? What are the different perspectives on this by the funding organisations (DEET/CES), the educational providers (TAFE teachers) and the CES clients themselves. This report doesn't address all of these concerns directly, but it does focus on the latter group, the CES clients.

Critical perspectives on literacy programs for the unemployed, such as the ones outlined in this chapter, are rarely articulated in official reports and publications. Literacy providers generally are unlikely to highlight negative aspects of their programs, especially ones to do with the validity of their programs, because it may jeopardise the funding of further courses. Instead, we usually find a more consensus-oriented picture presented in which the focus is often on grateful students or pedagogical issues involving innovative curriculum or how teachers manage to motivate CES clients and achieve some success (see Campbell 1994, Darveniza 1994, Bowie 1994, Bates 1994).

CHAPTER FIVE

A profile of the interview sample and research method

The main research component of this study involved the interviewing of twenty-seven CES clients who had been referred by the local CES office to a TAFE college in the metropolitan west of Sydney.

This chapter provides some background details on the interviewee sample, including demographic data on gender, ages, nationalities and levels of formal schooling. Also considered in this chapter are some details of the interview method. All the names of the interviewees have been changed to provide confidentiality.

The interview sample

It can be seen from Table 2 that:

- there are more males than females (16 male, 59% compared to 11 females, 41%);
- over half of the interview sample are over 40 years of age (14, 52%);
- there are more non English speaking background clients than English speaking background clients (19 NESB, 70% compared to 8 ESB, 30%);
- the number of years living in Australia for the NESB group is fairly evenly spread (eg 5 between 1 and 5 years, 5 between 6 and 15 years, and 9 from 16 to more than 20 years). The mean number of years in Australia is 14;
- countries of birth vary a lot. Of the 13 countries represented, only Australia (8), Lebanon (5), Italy (3) and Philippines (2) have more than one person;

- most previous work falls into the unskilled category;
- over half of the interview sample (16, 59%) have had less than 10 years of formal schooling. It is difficult to make generalisations based on this category due to the different systems of schooling undertaken in different countries. Nevertheless, it would appear that about 20% (6) of the sample have had primary school level only.

Table 2 Profile of the Interview Sample

Name	M/F		Age	ESB/NESB		Yrs in Aust.	Country of birth	Previous work	Yrs of school
Greg	x		27	x			Australia	labourer	9
Pablo	x		34		x	11	Lebanon	shopkeeper	10
Mary		x	50		x	30	Italy	cleaner	8
Semioti		x	35		x	13	Indonesia	Pre-sch Asst	11
Paul	x		41	x			Australia	gen unskilled	9
Henri	x		37		x	22	Lebanon	cook	5
Wayne	x		22	x			Australia	assembly	9
Angelica		x	55		x	34	Italy	shop cashier	5
Mario	x		41		x	25	Italy	builder	9
Francisco	x		41		x	5	Chile	teacher	12
Seva		x	54		x	1	Sri Lanka	dressmaker	10
Don	x		63	x			Australia	unskilled	3
Theresa		x	41		x	1	Philippines	sales work	11
Wabah	x		43		x	2	Egypt	HS teacher	11
Tony	x		50	x			Australia	unskilled	8
Saide		x	50		x	19	Syria	process work	9
Rosa		x	39		x	20	Portugal	cleaner	6
Christina		x	27		x	1	Philippines	dressmaker	10
David	x		32	x			Australia	display Asst	10
George	x		39		x	20	Lebanon	railway work	10
Phoung		x	30		x	6	Cambodia	Shop Asst	2
Victor	x		50	x			Australia	driver	9
Peter	x		22	x			Australia	unskilled	9
Noy		x	42		x	19	Thailand	restaurant	11
Zara		x	27		x	10	Lebanon	process work	10
Mahmoud	x		43		x	20	Lebanon	no work	5
Kim	x		30		x	6	Vietnam	machinist	8

These characteristics equate with many of those in the most disadvantaged categories of unemployed people presented in chapter one (eg older, largely male, NESB, previous unskilled work and little formal education).

This interview sample is seen to be fairly representative of CES clients referred to TAFE in this area. For example, of the total of 95

clients referred to this one TAFE college during 1993 up to the time when most interviews were conducted (in October/November 1993), 65% were male, and 35% female and 26% were ESB (mainly Australian born) and 74% NESB (NSW TAFE 1993). A similar picture of varied countries of birth, relatively unskilled work backgrounds and lack of formal education was also found.

The interviews

Interviews were conducted during 1993. Several interviews were conducted in the middle of the year, but the majority were conducted at the end of the academic year (in November).

The interview sample were selected randomly, depending mainly on availability. Approximately a quarter of the total clients referred by the CES to the one TAFE college during 1993 were interviewed. Clients were at various stages of their participation in a literacy program. There were some who had attended for most of the year, others who had attended for a while and then discontinued for some reason, and there were others who had only just started, in fact one or two were waiting to start a class.

Interviewees were selected from student records in the adult basic education section. Most interviews took place after classes or separate times were arranged for interviews, which usually took place at the college, but in some cases in the clients' homes if travelling to the college was inconvenient. Interviews took between fifteen minutes and one hour, depending on interviewee responses. All interviews were tape recorded with the permission of the clients and later transcribed.

There was some degree of role conflict for me as the interviewer and also as a teacher in the ABE section at the college. None of the interviewees were my own students, but nevertheless, many of the them would have identified me with the ABE teaching section at the college, despite my initial explanation that this research was independent of the college.

There are positive and negative aspects to this. On the positive side, it made the request for an interview relatively easy and clients (students) were probably more relaxed at being interviewed by someone they vaguely knew, or at least identified with the college. On the negative side, interviewee responses to questions may have

been influenced by their knowledge of my affiliation with the college. This may not be such a relevant issue however, given that the focus of the interview questions was not so much on pedagogical issues relating to their experiences as students at the college, but more on their perceptions and dispositions about being referred to a literacy program and how it all related to their employment situation, (hence reference to 'clients' instead of 'students').

My interviewing style was deliberately interactive. I tried to develop a genuine dialogue with interviewees in which I had questions I wanted answered, but I was also prepared to proffer my own views (eg encouragement, disagreement) at times during the interviews. This is at variance with the traditional interviewing paradigm in which the interviewer undertakes a predominantly passive, listening role (see description in Oakley 1981).

This more interactive style developed through my own attempts to establish a relaxed interviewing atmosphere in which interviewees would be most forthcoming about the issues I wished to introduce. It also allowed for interviewees to draw on me for information if they wished. As an ABE teacher at the college, it was not uncommon for issues to arise in which the interviewee had questions to ask of me (about other courses for example). To 'hold back' and try to maintain a one-way interviewing relationship would have restricted this free flow of information in genuine dialogue. Besides, it was more comfortable (for both interviewer and interviewee) engaging in an interactive manner in the interviews.

A series of focus questions were prepared, and these were referred to at times during the interviews. In most cases, though, especially after the initial few interviews, these focus questions were referred to only rarely, or perhaps at the conclusion of the interview to ensure that the key points had been covered.

As my confidence grew in the interviews it was not necessary to refer to the questions. I knew what I wanted to ask and discuss and it was better to introduce them in the context of the interview without the need to refer to notes. This meant that questions did not follow any pre-set pattern determined by notes. It also allowed the interviewees some measure of control over how the interviews proceeded. This interview structure draws on the semi-structured interview format Dowsett explains he uses to obtain rich qualitative data (Dowsett 1986, 1987).

The next two chapters present data based on the interview transcriptions. There are two areas that are central to the issues discussed so far in this study. First, the decision to participate. Whose decision was this? How did the CES clients feel about the process of this referral? Whose interests were involved in the decision to refer clients to a literacy program? Second, how do these CES clients see the relationship between their referral to a literacy program and the objective of gaining employment?

CHAPTER SIX

Participation in a literacy program: Whose decision? Whose interests?

The question of whose decision it is and in whose interests it is that CES clients participate in a literacy program is integral to many of the issues outlined in earlier chapters. Are CES clients being told (or at least persuaded, perhaps even forced) to participate because the CES believes it is in the best interests of all concerned, or are CES clients participating because they themselves believe it is in their own best interests?

This chapter sets out to explore answers to these questions from the viewpoint of the clients involved in literacy programs.

In a technical sense it is invariably the decision of the CES to send a client to a TAFE college for a literacy program because all the official arrangements (contacting the college, agreeing to the provision offered) are usually initiated and undertaken by the CES. However, the client should have an important role in this decision, especially if it is part of a Newstart agreement. It should be a decision made following 'consultation' between the relevant CES officer and the client, having regard to all the possible options for the client and influenced also by the recommendations of the literacy provider.

The chapter falls into two parts - the first part looks at the views of clients who appear to be in full agreement with the CES that a literacy program is what they need and they are happy to participate. The second part looks at the views of some clients who feel that it was against their wishes or that they were persuaded to participate when in fact if given the 'free' choice they would rather have not participated.

PART ONE:

Yeah, I'm happy to come here (Henri)

Of the total interview sample of twenty seven CES clients, sixteen (60%) indicated they were happy to be referred to the literacy programs at TAFE. Nine clients (33%) indicated they had some reluctance or that they were persuaded in some way against their initial wishes. Two clients (7%), were unable explain clearly in the interviews just where they stood because of their language difficulties. Interestingly, but perhaps not too surprisingly, nearly all of the clients expressing satisfaction at their referral to a literacy program were from non English speaking backgrounds. Only three were Australian born. It would seem that for many in the NESB group their referral to TAFE was seen to be an ideal opportunity to improve both their spoken English skills and literacy. Theresa, for example, from the Philippines and with less than two years in Australia, took the initiative and suggested to the CES that she needed help with her English.

I = Interviewer
T = Theresa

I: *When the CES sent you here, em, was that their idea or was it your idea?*

T: It was me

I: *Your idea ... What, they interviewed you did they?*

T: The first time ... Janice from the CES, I told her, and then she phoned this er school and I came to enrol in the course (inaudible)

I: *So, you wanted to come here to improve your reading and writing, you suggested it ...?*

T: Especially my, my talking, how I communicate to people, because I don't know, I, sometimes I don't know what word to say so I ...

I: *I think you communicate quite well, yeah, I don't think there's a problem there ... In fact most of the classes here are for reading*

and writing aren't they, not, I mean you do a lot of speaking as well, yeah, so um, I suppose what I'm getting at is that, um, the CES didn't make you come here?

T: No ...

I: *It was your idea and they were quite happy for you to come here?*

T: Yeah, I like to come to improve my English and just Janice who told me I would like ... (inaudible)

Francisco, a secondary school teacher from Chile and in Australia for five years, saw his referral to a literacy program as an important part of his Newstart agreement and also, like Theresa, saw it as an opportunity to improve both his spoken English and literacy.

I: *And when you went to the CES six months ago, um, for an interview, did they say think, you know, you should go for TAFE college, was that ...?*

F: Yeah, yeah, CES send me here, yeah, and because I signed the agreement

I: *Signed, oh yes, you signed the agreement, the Newstart agreement*

F: Yeah, yeah

I: *Right, and part of that agreement says that you have to go to ...?*

F: Yeah, and the present job (inaudible)

I: *Were you happy to be sent here?*

F: Yes, yes, I coming with a feeling good, yeah ... because eh, is my opportunity, yeah for learn the language

I: *Right*

One of the clients, Angelica, an Italian who has lived in Australia for more than thirty years, made it particularly straightforward for the CES. She had independently recognised her need to improve her

language and literacy skills and had enrolled in a literacy class before being interviewed by the CES:

A: They were very happy, because they said, they ask me on my first interview, they ask me if I was doing something to find a job, and I said look, I can't find a job but, I'm going to the course, to English class, you know, to improve my English. And she said, oh that's, that's very good, she said, because you're doing that for the, you know, try to get the job or something

I: *So, even though they didn't send you here*

A: No they didn't send me

I: *You're quite happy?*

A: But they were quite happy when I told them, yes

I: *Right, that's good. And every time you go in there, I mean, it's on their records now is it, they know that you're coming here?*

A: Well I think so, because they've got everything on the papers. Every time I go there they don't interview me ... All I do there, I just have a look around if there is something for me, which is very hard, and eh, eh, I put my number down, you know, just to show I was there, I been there

For another client, Mario, Italian born and in Australia for twenty five years, although it was the CES who initiated his referral to the literacy program, it was something he had considered doing anyway because he believed his literacy skills had deteriorated since his brief schooling in Australia at the age of fifteen:

M: Then I could write my own letters and things even though there were a few mistakes, but I did it ... Now I, you know, just stumble all over the place ... But back to this, like er, when the CES send me here, I didn't feel uncomfortable at all because I actually was looking forward, and I, a few years ago to get in to one these sort of course ...

I: *So you were thinking about it anyway?*

M: Yes, I was thinking about it anyway, but I didn't know the way to go about it ... Now, I mean, maybe, people feel the way they speak to me, feel embarrassed because I think all along that they haven't been informed ... the right way, they can come here without say going there ...

I: *So in your case it was actually quite convenient that the CES gave you a little bit of encouragement ...?*

M: Gave a little bit of chance, encourage, said, you know, we get these people, you know, which are there's a lot of people on literacy that are born here ...

For Rosa, a Portuguese woman who has been in Australia for twenty years and works part time as a cleaner, there wasn't the hint of any pressure from the CES, even after some prompting from me in the interview. In fact, according to Rosa, the CES were particularly concerned for her job prospects when her pension (sole parent) expired and they recommended she do something to improve her education:

I: *Getting back to actually in the CES office, um, so, they suggested it but you were quite happy?*

R: Yes, yes, I was quite happy because I think that's helpful and you know I would be very lucky to be here everyday if I didn't have the work, but I'm lucky to have the work as well, so, but if I didn't have the work, it's good to have two days work, er school

I: *Um, yet they didn't force you, so they didn't have to force to come, they didn't say look, you know, you've got to go to college?*

R: No, no they didn't force me, I just went and looked for work because I had this job but I want full time so I decided to go there and see what's available ... I actually ...

I: *So they suggested it might be a good idea, did they, did they?*

R: Yeah ... They didn't push me to come or anything ...

I: *They left it up to you, yeah*

R: And after that I received a letter, they advised me to take the English course because my pension gonna stop next year when my son sixteen, so they write me this letter and advise me, but I was already at school

I: *Yeah*

R: So then, you know, the one who wrote the letter didn't know maybe I was at school already, but er, they advised me in this letter to come and have a course because the pension gonna stop and you and

I: *What's, what's the course got to do with the pension?*

R: Because er, the pension gonna stop, that means if I don't have a pension and if I don't have a job, that's, that would be difficult, so, they advised me to go and have er, any sort of course to help me with er, jobs

I: *To help you with jobs, right?*

R: Make sure you can have a job when you don't have a pension

I: *So what they're trying to tell you really is look, you have to get ready ...*

R: Prepare yourself for a job

I: *Right, because at the moment you're getting a pension, yeah*

Zara, a Lebanese woman who had been in Australia for ten years and with a background in factory process work, similarly accepted the obvious and uncomplicated connection her CES officer made between her language and literacy skills and getting a job, and she was quite willing to attend literacy classes:

I: *And when you went to the CES did, um did they suggest that you come here, was it their idea or was it your idea?*

Z: They send me over

I: *Did they?*

Z: Yeah, because they, I try to look to find a job and they give me lot of papers and things you know to show for their people the ones I wanna, you know, get the job like the factories and stuff like that, and er, no one accept me ... First thing not many jobs around, second thing with my English, and I mentioned that with the CES, people there you know, the workers there, and they said the best thing that I can come in here and do a course ... to get little bit experience

I: *To improve your reading and writing?*

Z: Yeah, yeah and I said alright, fair enough because I want to work in the future, I don't want to stay at home ...

I: *Yeah, so you were quite happy to come here?*

Z: Yeah, yeah

For the three Australian born clients who were happy to participate in a literacy program, their participation appeared conditional on a number of factors, including, that the literacy program be specifically related to their vocational needs, and that the mode of tuition (individual versus group tuition) also be specific to their needs. Peter for example, a twenty-two year old, was keen to develop a career in diving. He had already passed several diving courses which included a largely practical component, but the 'masters' course was more difficult and required a lot of reading and a final multiple choice exam. He had attended a literacy course previously in Brisbane where he received one-to-one tuition and this was the type of tuition he wanted again. He had subsequently tried working in a small group literacy class at a TAFE college in Sydney, but it didn't work for him. Only if he could receive one-to-one tuition again would he participate:

I: *All right, um, in terms of you coming here, I mean, originally when you got in touch with me I think it was via ... CES wasn't it?*

P: Yes, yeah

I: *Yeah, did they, was it them who suggested you come here or did you suggest it to them or ... ?*

P: Well they, they sort of suggested that um, if I were to go to do education, adult literacy somewhere, and I said, yeah well I said that I'd done adult literacy and it was in a group situation, it just didn't work

I: *Right*

P: And I said that I'd heard of one-to-one teaching, but I didn't know where it was, and this lady there she said she'd heard of it, and she said she'll give, make a few phone calls, so she found out it was here ... Um, so I was actually, I thought oh well that sounds good, cos I just found the class situation just didn't work for me, um, I found I couldn't learn ...

David, thirty-two years of age, with a background working in the retail industry, was also happy to attend a small group literacy class, but after a couple of months he had the opportunity to attend a hospitality course instead, and he chose the latter because he believed it had a stronger link with getting work.

In Greg's case, he had a specific need to attend literacy classes because he was having difficulties completing a horticulture course. As with some of the other CES clients (Theresa, Angelica), he initiated his own entry into the literacy course:

G: Well, I was doing a course with the council and I explained to them that er, I had troubles reading and, and with the exam I'd like to have it orally instead of, you know, on paper, and they ask me the questions, instead of, you know, they'll take me round the bushland and I'll explain it to em ... But um, and they actually the CES came up to see how everyone was going on the course

I: *Right*

G: And they spoke up and said, look I've got reading problems you know, so they said, you know, I also said yeah, I'd like

to go into a literacy course next, before anything else, and they said all right we'll do it for you

I: *Yeah, so they sent you here in the first place did they, or they organised it?*

G: No, well I, I sent like, they organised it for me, but that's what I wanted to do ... to come here, to learn

I: *Yeah, yeah, cos you'd already told them that that was ...?*

G: Yeah

Greg in fact, while he may have been happy to be referred to TAFE, he wasn't happy with his progress and left soon after starting. He makes it clear though, that it was his decision, his responsibility and he could cope with the consequences with the CES:

I: *And no one is checking, no one at the CES is sort of um, checking to see if you, if you've finished ...?*

G: Yeah they have, they have seen, you know, checking that I'm going ... Like they actually did ring up and asked to see me cos I didn't go a couple of times

I: *What here?*

G: Yeah, and they're just wanting to know, you know, cos they're saying they're paying for it and they just want to know why I haven't gone, you know

I: *Yeah .. I don't know how that happened .... I don't know how the CES would have found out about that, unless you started here and then if we thought you'd finished, maybe we sent a paper in saying that you'd completed it, and then .... I don't know how that would have happened*

I: *So, did they hassle you a little bit, I mean ... ?*

G: Oh, not really

I: *They're putting a bit of pressure on you though, were they?*

G: Oh, just slight, you know, to go along ... yeah, but um ... you know, I've sent myself here, and if I leave I'll leave, you know, that's their problem, and it's my business what I do

I: *That's right, it is*

G: I don't care who, you know ... who it is

I: *Yeah, you vote with your feet ... and you make up your own mind about whether ... I mean, if you thought that this was really beneficial, and you were getting a lot out it, then you'd be here every week and you'd be ...*

G: That's right

Later in the interview I prompted Greg further on the issue of the possible consequences of not participating as reported by other CES clients, but he appeared relatively unconcerned:

I: *So, the fact that, you haven't been here that often is, just like you said, an indication that you're not really getting much out of it ... And that's fair enough, and I think if they asked you that, that's, that's your response to ... But I'm interested to find out if there's any pressure being put on, because, teachers like myself here, we don't really want people forced to come here, you know*

G: Well, I don't think that's right either

I: *No, no, well people don't learn much when they're forced to come anyway*

G: Well, if you don't want to do it you don't want to do it

I: *Yeah, I mean, some, some guy actually said look, you know he was told he was going to have his dole cut off if he, if he didn't come here, and that sort of stuff ... I mean*

G: Well that's, yeah that's what they say, you know

I: *Have they told you the same thing?*

G: No, they haven't told me that

I: *Yeah*

G: But um, that's what they do, they'd say it would affect my benefits, you know, but that's, that's right that's what they would say

I: *So ultimately you're sort of ...?*

G: You've got no choice, sort of

I: *Yeah*

G: Or I'll lose my money

I: *Yeah, or you could go back there and ...?*

G: But they couldn't, they'd say, but they couldn't, they couldn't do that ... They'd probably do it, but they'd have to put me back on

I: *Yeah*

G: Once I start complaining, going on like ...

I: *And you would?*

G: Yeah ...

I: *But from what you've said you've done a couple of courses anyway, I mean it's not as though, I mean you proved that you're prepared to do training*

G: Oh yeah, yeah ... I've done, I've done two courses already

It is difficult to make any firm conclusions based on such a small interview sample (of sixteen CES clients). Nevertheless, for this small group who were all happy (at least initially) to attend a literacy program it would seem that for those born overseas, the literacy program provided them with a welcome opportunity to generally improve their English language and literacy skills. For the most part they saw future employment opportunities resulting from this.

Most of them thought their current level of spoken and written English was affecting their job prospects. For the Australian born clients (three of them), they had quite specific needs relating to employment and training. In the cases of both Peter and Greg, they had specific needs involving assistance to pass a training course (diving and horticulture respectively). This was all they wanted, and if they found the literacy provision wasn't meeting their needs, then they would leave, regardless of possible adverse consequences with the CES. These two clients also specifically wanted one-to-one tuition.

PART TWO:

... the way they went about it was a little bit subtle, but you know, I did feel that I was given a bit of a, a push (Victor)

Oh, you know what they're like, like Newstart, you got no sort of say in it ... (Wayne)

There were nine CES clients who indicated in the interviews that they were not entirely willing participants in the process of being referred to a literacy program. The circumstances of each are quite different, though there are some common threads. Perhaps the most common is that of being talked around by the CES into participating. Often the approach was quite subtle - no one was ordering their participation, but they were quite gently persuaded.

Don, for example, an Australian born man in his sixties with little or no chance of ever working again, seems to have been quite easily swayed:

I: *What about when you went down the CES and they said that, is it O.K to be interviewed by someone from the TAFE? Did that bother you at all?*

D: They asked me that and I said no at first ... and we's talking there, talking, and she asked me again, and I said, yeah all right. She wanted her to go too, but, she's Italian (his wife - the interview was conducted in his home with his wife nearby)

Later in the interview I asked Don further about his participation in the literacy program, and it became clear that the CES didn't see any vocational outcomes resulting from him participating. In fact, the question really needs to be asked, why send him to TAFE to do a literacy program at sixty three years of age and when he showed no real motivation to do so?:

I: *So if the CES hadn't organised you to be interviewed, you wouldn't have gone to TAFE anyway would you?*

D: No, no, I wouldn't have worried about it.

I: *No, and, I mean I might be wrong, but from talking to you, it doesn't seem to bother you too much about the reading and writing does it? It's not going to stop you getting a job, and I suppose, you consider yourself sort of retired anyway don't you?*

D: Yeah, well they told me over there, even one of the men said, you're too old, you're wasting your time coming over here (to the CES). He said don't come anymore until we get in touch with you ... that's good enough an' it?

I: *Yes, just about, but they still asked you if you wanted to be interviewed for adult basic ed didn't they?*

D: They still sent me a form to fill in, just to fill in not to go round. Well, I take that form in every 3 months ... That's as far as it goes.

Tony, a fifty year old Australian born man was different from Don in the sense that Tony was desperate to get a job and much of the interview was focussed on job related aspects, but the situation with the CES officer and his referral to a TAFE literacy program does appear similar to the situation with Don:

I: *Do you feel pressured by the CES, I mean, for example, would you have come along here anyway or was it only because of the CES?*

T: Oh they did push me ... they didn't push me ... I wouldn't say they actually pushed me ... they talked me into it ... The fact that I needed help, and I thought, oh well, I didn't really want to come, I just wanted a job ...

In the interview Tony then went on to explain in some detail that he had recently joined a job club and applied for more than fifty jobs and that he had had only three days work in two years. I returned to the issue of his referral to TAFE:

I: *Alright, so I mean, you wouldn't have come here for help with your reading and writing unless they'd sort of given you a bit of a push?*

T: A bit of a push ...

I: *But if you'd actually refused to come, do you think they would've, sort of, put pressure on you?*

T: I don't know what they would've done, I've often wondered about that ... I think maybe ... I can't remember exactly, but, maybe the first time I tried to talk out of it ... I didn't really want to come, but I wasn't overworried, and then I said, do I have to go? I think maybe she said I don't have to go, but she kept on talking about it ... Oh well ... so

Victor, also a fifty year old Australian born man, describes in some detail the way he was 'talked into' attending a literacy program by the CES. He describes the subtlety in the process, playing perhaps on his guilt complex that because he wasn't in full employment he should be doing something. He also thought initially that his benefits would increase if he did a course, but that wasn't the case:

I: *Did you feel, was there any sort of obligation on the CES's part for you to come or?*

V: Um, well so far they've said no more about, er they um, oh they more or less stated, lady I spoke to at the time said, well, you know, um I think it's a good idea for you to go there, she sort of made me feel that, perhaps because I

wasn't doing anything else, apart from the part time job I had, that I had time on my hands and, she thought I should come here. You know, I felt it was a bit of a, it wasn't actually um, I can't try to put it, I wasn't actually forced to, but I was, but I was sort of persuaded quite strongly to, to come here I thought, you know and that ...

I: *And they may not have been too happy if you didn't?*

V: Well that's right

I: *... if you weren't prepared to make, put that effort in*

V: Well that's what I felt, that's what I felt, my wife got that feeling too that er, er and I did find out later on er, whether or not this was approved course from the, it wasn't apparently because I thought that you apparently you can get extra benefits by doing some sort of an approved course

I: *If it is a full time course you can*

V: Yeah, but er, they said no, you know, that it wasn't and er, and I thought, and then someone said to me, well you are doing it purely on your behalf, even though they suggested through the CES to come here, it was sort of er, a bit of a mixture you know

I: *Yeah, it sounds like a little bit of informal ...*

V: Yeah, I would've, I would've, I would've actually preferred to, to sort of say I'll come myself you know

I: *Yeah*

V: Like I did at, 20 years back you know, because then I, I sort of could have concern – that particular time, I, I, my concentration was OK and things were going quite well as far as my life was concerned, you know, I had no extra hassles in any other way and I really put everything into it which was good, but I felt now that things are not like that, you know, and it's been bit of a struggle

I: *Your here I guess because the CES thought it was a good idea and sort of gave you a gentle nudge ...*

V: They did yeah

I: *... That, that affects your motivation to some extent?*

V: Yeah it does a little bit, to feel that, OK because you can't find a position that you're more or less told, well, we suggest this is a good idea for you, you know, and er, as you're not sort of employed and doing anything, you know, full time employment

The issue of the unequal power relations between CES staff and clients needs to be looked at in light of the above comments. While on the surface, as the previous comments have indicated, there is always discussion and a certain degree of mutual decision making involved between CES officers and clients, the bottom line is that the CES officers have the power to enforce their decisions, and it is the CES perspective that often prevails. This doesn't often come to the surface in discussions with CES clients, but it's there as a factor underpinning negotiations between the two parties.

The negotiation between CES officers and clients over, for example, a Newstart agreement, is not one of negotiation between equals. Because the CES officers have the ultimate discretion of sanctions in the form of denying the clients their allowances, the power is weighed very much in favour of the CES. This is demonstrated in comments made by Wayne, a twenty two year old Australian born CES client:

I: *How did the um, CES know that you had problems with, with the reading and writing?*

W: Oh, well, I explained it to them, sort of why I wasn't happy at school sort of thing ... And they suggested that sort of thing ... See how it goes ... Went there ...

I: *They didn't pressure you to go, they didn't sort of um, you know, force you, I mean if you said you didn't want to go or if you didn't really feel like it ...?*

W: Oh, you know what they're like ... like Newstart, you got no sort of say in it

I: *The Newstart agreement ...?*

W: Because if you sort of say no, they just cut you off the allowance straight away ... sort of, so ...

I: *Well, that's the sort of message I'm getting from other people ... Some people saying yeah, yeah, sure, I'm quite happy to go to a class, and some people are saying, well, you're going to send me anyway, you know, I didn't have any choice ... So, did you have, you know, ... Were you happy to go really or was it ...?*

W: Oh ... half of me wanted to go and the other half I didn't really wanna ...

I: *So they sort of ...?*

W: It's just like a mixture ...

I: *And they gave you bit of a push did they?*

W: Oh yeah

I: *Would they have cut your money off ... ?*

W: Yeah I think they would ...

(I then explain that it's difficult for us at the college, getting students who don't really want to be there)

I: *So with you it sounds like it's a bit, a bit of both, it sounds like you needed a bit of help, but ...*

W: One half likes it and the other half, you know ... CES

I: *But you stuck it out though didn't you?*

W: Yeah

With Mary, a fifty year old Italian born woman who has been in Australia for thirty years, the power imbalance between CES officer

and client was obvious. In the interview I asked Mary if the CES had ever checked on her attendance at the literacy classes:

I: *Have they ever tried to um, phoned you up to see if you're going or spoken to you to see if you're going to class or ...?*

M: Oh yeah, they ask me, yeah, when I went last time yeah, I showed the paper and the Social Security ask to if you do any, any course

I: *Right, right ... Are they, are they pushing you to come here, I mean, if, if you didn't want to come back anymore ...?*

M: You have to come

I: *You, what ...?*

M: Otherwise, otherwise not give employment, employment benefit

I: *Right, did they say that or?*

M: Yeah, yeah, yeah

I: *That makes it difficult for you doesn't it because um ...?*

M: I was very ...

I: *Is that what made you upset?*

M: Yeah, I was very upset

In Mary's case the threat of losing her benefits was very real. Later in the interview I followed up the issue in a bit more detail:

I: *Do you think if you stopped coming to classes here, do you think you'd be in trouble with the CES?*

M: Oh yes

I: *Do you think so?*

M: Oh yes

I: *What would they do?*

M: They not give, they say they stop the unemploy benefit

I: *They said that before did they?*

M: Oh yes ... Everytime still for the Social Security send the letter, I have to go a couple of week ago for interview, and they say, if you not ring up to make appointment we stop the whatever

I: *But if you explained to them at the CES that um, the reading and writing is a bit hard and that you don't think it's going to help you get a job, do you think it will make ...?*

M: Not make any difference to them, no

I: *And that was what made you upset before ...?*

M: Yeah

I: *When they sent you here*

M: And they make me upset too because years ago a widow used to have a pension, and now they no give any pension if you no got any younger children who go to school

I: *Right, when the children get older you don't get one, um*

M: Now change for everything

I: *So really, so every week you come here to see Margaret just because the CES ...?*

M: Oh yes, just because they send me here to come

I: *Yeah, yeah, that's pity because it makes it hard, hard for you*

M: I think, if, if you force somebody to do something, I think it's hard

I: *Um*

M: It's more hard because you always think if they not force me to come in here I won't come ... I like to come, you know

I: *But you like to make your own mind?*

M: Yeah, yeah

I: *To make your own d.cision*

M: For me, and eh, the two hours the teacher only talk to me, explain to me and the two hours go, you know, it's time to go home again

I: *Yeah, so you don't hate coming here?*

M: Oh, no, no, no,

I: *But, but um, you don't like the way the CES force?*

M: Force before yes

I: *Yeah, yeah*

M: And the thing that they said to you, if you no go, they will not give you any employment benefit ... They, they always, that's the first question they got

Mary's comments mirror to some extent those of Victor's, in that neither of them wanted to be forced to attend. If they were going to attend a literacy program, they wanted it to be their decision. The element of force, especially if backed up by threats of cutting allowances had the effect of causing some resentfulness towards the CES and resistance to participation in the literacy program.

Two other clients were negatively disposed to attending a literacy program. They both suffered a medical condition that made it difficult if not impossible for them to gain employment. Mahmoud, forty-four years of age, born in Lebanon and in Australia for twenty years, hadn't worked for the past thirteen years.

The whole interview was dominated by his preoccupation with a dust allergy which prevents him from working. It was clear there

was a history of confrontation with the CES over his medical condition and whether the CES would accept that he couldn't work. With these overriding concerns it was very difficult to focus his attention on the literacy program:

I: *I'm wondering why, why did they send ... the CES sent you here though didn't they for reading and writing?*

M: Yeah, see every, every report for, I don't know, I don't know why

I: *Did they think that you can't get a job because you can't read and write too well, is that what they think or, why did they send you here?*

M: No, no, I told you, I, I know ... no, no problem for learn English, because I work ten years in Speedo ... Boss told me do this, do this, understand ... No need talk with machine, but understand other, but CES, people in CES think me a bludger, I, I'm not sick ... I told them many, many times, too many times if you ... Nobody, nobody feel like I'm feel, stop money, stop money.

Later in the interview Mahmoud makes reference again to having his allowances cut if he doesn't comply:

I: *And when you go to the CES do they, do they ask you about your reading and writing, do they say, you know, are you going to ... TAFE or, or don't they care?*

M: Somebody in CES (inaudible) you know, he said, I want send you to school. I said alright. He said if you make meeting, if, anything, no come, cut your money

I: *They said that did they?*

M: Yeah, CES told me ... it happened too, because one appointment

I: *If you don't come to classes they'll cut your money?*

M: Yeah, sometime happened, I have appointment half past ten, half past ten. No ten o'clock ... I think half past ten ... I come ten past ten ... Lady in CES she upset on one day (inaudible)

said straight away, I cut money if you make it appeal (inaudible). I said I don't care, if you cut money, cut money ... not have in medical centre because (inaudible) sometime because every week, every week come, come, every week

I: *Right*

M: Make it like this because, think I'm liar ... I told you ... every week come, come, I'm, I'm, I'm sick, cut money, cut money ... I don't care, I don't want any money ... Straight away lady go like crazy you know (inaudible) ... because why me it very hard time for me

The other reluctant participant was George, thirty-nine years of age, also from Lebanon, and living in Australia for the past twenty years. George worked in the railways for eighteen years. He hasn't worked at all for the past six years because of a work related injury to his back. He claims he won't be given any work because he has a compensation case pending. He attended several sessions in the literacy program but didn't continue. He couldn't see the need to improve his literacy:

I: *What I am interested in is em, when the CES decide to send people to ... TAFE*

G: Yeah, CES last time I saw them ... She say you speak English good, I fill all the form (inaudible) ... I say what you want to send me to school for? Why?

I: *So why did they?*

G: Honest, you know ... If I did English I will go, but I not need it

I: *Yeah*

G: Because I can't get anymore than that

It was in fact very difficult to get detailed responses from George in the interview. He couldn't see any relationship between his literacy skills and getting a job and it was difficult to focus his attention on

TAFE literacy programs when his overriding concern was to get his compensation case settled:

I: *See that's what I'm interested in, the CES seems to be sending some people to us ... A lot of people are happy to come, but some people aren't very happy to come, and because ...*

G: Actually I'm not, I didn't say I'm not happy to come, but if I go, I going for nothing, because actually, I have to start do exercise for my body build up again, cos I didn't do (inaudible) for a long time, and I have to start walking now, walk, walk, you know ... see move my body, otherwise I'm gonna be fat, I never been like that before ... was very skinny like you ... 6 months I sit down never move ... big plaster arm, and this one here too ... It's not fair if I wanna go to school ... I mean if, I will go to school if I can get more English but so why, but I'm not going to get more than ...

I: *So you don't think it's gonna ...?*

G: It's not worth it

I: *It's not much point ...?*

G: Any job they send me on it I will do it, because I know what I do ... (inaudible) they call me handyman ...

I: *Right, and the jobs they send you to, it doesn't require much reading and writing anyway?*

G: No, no, last time I got the job at what's you call name, Concord painting ... they's give me the form, I fill all the form ... the last question they say, have you been compo the last five years, and I say I still on compo ... So what you coming here for, go out the door ...

I: *So the reason you can't get a job is nothing to do with your reading and writing?*

G: No, no, no ... no, no ... You can give me any form I fill em out for you ... no problem, I fill too many forms

I: *And also from what you say, you've done so many courses that your reading and writing's not that bad anyway ...*

G: No, no, no ... that's right

I: *Do you help your children?*

G: Oh, yes ...help them for homework, exam, timetable, projects, it's alright

I: *So, it still comes back to the reason, why did they send you to ... TAFE?*

G: Oh, they think maybe, maybe they think I can't speak English well enough, or maybe they, they doesn't know ... I got a certificate today, I gave it to, I gave doctor yesterday ... I gave them certificate with application today ... They say oh, we're not interested the form, the certificate. Look, I said, I'm (inaudible) conversation ... I told you hundred times, and you say you're not interested ... I go ring up to my solicitor and I tell him about you, and I watch him what he said, and I told him the CES, when I give the certificate, they say not interested ... Say, they can't say that ...

I: *This is the CES you went to see?*

G: Yeah, now I ring up to my solicitor, about the certificate

I: *He said they can't ...*

G: They can't say not interested

I: *They can't ignore it ...*

G: You can't, because I'm on compensation for six years, all the money they give to me they're going to take it back, why you push hard on me for I don't know, why ... make a harder for me?

I: *That's why I'm wondering why they send people like you to TAFE college for reading and writing when you don't, from speaking to you, it doesn't seem you really need it?*

G: No

I: *But you still go, you still come?*

G: To where?

I: *To ... TAFE*

G: Why?

I: *But you still went did you?*

G: Yeah I been there (inaudible) ... I been there (inaudible) and I see not really, you know ... actually not interested, because, all the words she going to give it to me, I been use it you know, long time or actually I'm not need it ... too many things not needed

The interview data in this chapter represent a range of views from CES clients. Although this chapter has drawn a distinction between those who were happy and willing to participate in a literacy program and those who felt they were pressured in some way by the CES, it is clear also there were many different factors operating which affected the dispositions of each of them.

A couple of themes nevertheless have emerged. For example, the general congruence between the NESB clients and the CES on the issue of participation. More recent NESB migrants in particular (eg Theresa, Francisco) felt their English was poor, but also longer term NESB migrants (eg Angelica, Mario, Rosa and Zara) were keen participants largely because they had never received a formal education in English.

It is a little unclear, though, whether their motivation to participate was primarily to get a job or whether it was to improve their English proficiency generally, a means perhaps of catching up on their lost education opportunities of the past. This issue will be discussed more in the next chapter. In terms of whose decision and whose interests were involved in their participation in a literacy program, it is clear that this group felt it was their decision and in their interests.

This, however, wasn't the case for other NESB clients such as Mahmoud and George, both of whom had medical problems, or for

Mary, who felt that at fifty, and recently widowed, she shouldn't be forced to attend a literacy program in order to gain her allowances.

For the smaller sample of English speaking background clients, themes are not so clearly apparent. A number of factors seem to be operating, including age and work aspirations/prospects.

For example, Peter, David and Greg at twenty-two, thirty-two and twenty-seven years of age respectively, were all willing participants in a literacy program and they all considered it was in their own best interests in terms of their future work. Each of them, however, made it clear they would only participate while the course remained in their best interests, and participation would be on their terms.

Peter, for example, would only participate providing he received individual tuition, not group work. David left when he had the opportunity of doing a more vocationally related course. And Greg left when he realised the program was not meeting his needs.

In contrast, three of the older ESB clients were relatively unwilling participants, or at least they needed some pressure. Don was sixty-three, and really couldn't see the point of participating, even though he went along with it for a couple of months. Tony and Victor were both fifty, and neither of them really agreed with the decision to participate, and neither could they see that their interests were directly being served. These clients may have reached a later stage in their lives where, as Levine (1986) explains, they have reached an 'accommodation' with their literacy difficulties. They may have felt that they couldn't see a job eventuating from improved literacy, and having managed a range of jobs to this stage of their lives, improving their literacy ability wasn't going to make much difference.

It is this link between literacy and jobs that now needs to be considered in more detail.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Getting a job: What difference does literacy make?

This chapter considers the possible links between literacy ability and getting jobs as seen through the perspectives of those interviewed in this research. It considers these links following discussions in the interviews about previous job experiences and the current job situation facing the interviewees.

In part one of this chapter, consideration is given to those perspectives that see improved literacy skills as absolutely integral to obtaining a job.

This is followed by some opposing viewpoints (part two) which show that in the past, many of these CES clients have managed very well in jobs, and literacy ability hasn't been a major factor.

The issues are then looked at more closely in part three, making a distinction between getting 'any' job in the current job market (recessionary at the time of the interviews) and the way that lack of literacy is perceived as limiting job or career 'choices'.

Finally, in part four, a distinction is made between the role of literacy in actually 'obtaining a job', as opposed to being able to 'perform well in that job'.

PART ONE:

... if I can I want to learn, you know, to, you know, to be good at the English and get good job (Zara)

Surprisingly few interviewees (six or seven - approximately a quarter of the interview sample) could see a direct relationship between improving their literacy skills and getting a job, though their comments varied a great lot. For some, such as Noy, a forty-two year old woman from Thailand and a resident in Australia for

the past nineteen years, there did seem to be such a direct relationship. Noy and the CES were in full agreement that a literacy program was what she needed:

N: Yeah, I asked them and they sent me here ... they're happy

I: *Because they think, they agree that you need to improve your reading and writing?*

N: Yeah, yeah .... they say eh, it's good for me, you know, because, it's good for that can read and writing ...

I: *Yeah ... Do you think if your reading and writing improves a lot ... Do you think that um, it will be easier to get a job?*

N: Yeah, I think so ... because I know a lot of ... friends and they're working, like my friend, working the packing, the eh, factory, and my daughter working in the Silverwater

I: *Are friends Thai are they?*

N: Yeah, Australia

I: *Right, Australians, Yeah ... Oh, and they've said if you can read and write OK you'd get a job?*

N: Yeah

I: *Because actually it's very hard to get jobs at the moment isn't it?*

N: Yeah, because eh, a lot of people now, not like 19 years ago

I: *That's right ... So 19 years ago you had no trouble at all getting any work?*

N: Yes

Seva, a fifty-four year old woman from Sri Lanka, and resident in Australia for just over a year, similarly shared this faith that literacy would lead to a job, and she was apparently encouraged in her belief by the CES:

I: *So what about, do you think that coming here is going to help you get a job?*

S: Yes, of course

I: *I mean, you've been here for a year haven't you, it's quite a ....*

S: Yes, I improve a lot in my English class ... My grammar and spelling improving

I: *Right, right, so you've done a fair bit in a year haven't you?*

S: Yes

(details then provided of teacher and times of attendance)

I: *So, when the CES sent you here you, were you were quite happy about that?*

S: Yes

I: *Would you have come here if the CES hadn't sent you?*

S: Pardon

I: *Would you have come to this college if the CES hadn't sent you?*

S: Yes

I: *Yes, yes, so if the CES hadn't sent you here, you want to improve your reading and writing anyway?*

S: Yes

I: *Right*

S: They believe that I am get jobs after the, if I can study something more, they and I believe I can find a suitable job

I: *Right, you really think it will make much difference do you?*

G: Yes

For Noy and Seva and several other interviewees, all of whom have non English speaking backgrounds, there seems the belief, as indicated in chapter three, in the almost magical power of literacy to improve their lives, and in particular, to lead to jobs. It has to be acknowledged, however, that for these clients, it may well be their oral proficiency in English that they refer to as much as their reading and writing skills in English.

The interviews failed to distinguish this clearly. Although the literacy program was meant to provide essentially reading and writing skills, many of the CES clients saw it also as the opportunity to improve their spoken English, a view consistent with a broader, integrated definition of literacy (see DEET 1991b, p.9).

Wabah, for example, an Egyptian, forty-three years of age and with a professional background in teaching, was asked whether the literacy program he was participating in was directly linked to his chances of getting a job. His response indicates that he sees the question mainly in terms of his spoken English skills:

> Yes, I think so, because, if my English is 100 per cent ... I not say my English is 100 per cent at the moment, but if my language is 100 percent is my chance to get a job, more than it is 95 or ...

A similar interpretation can be applied to Theresa, who was born in the Philippines and has been a resident in Australia for slightly under two years. Theresa refers to 'communication' difficulties and in particular, understanding people:

I: *What was the idea of you coming here for reading and writing, was it so that you would get a job or ...?*

T: Yeah, to get a job to improve my English and to have a job so that I would not be hard up communicate with people

I: *Did the CES think that you wouldn't be able to get a job because your reading and writing wasn't very good, wasn't good enough?*

T: I think so ... because I really feel this is the same with my first time ... I am really hard up

I: *Hard up ?*

T: Yeah, I cannot understand the way some people they speak, but others I can, and I find I really need to come to TAFE

I: *And you think that your reading and writing is holding you back do you?*

T: Yeah ...

I: *If your reading and writing was better what sort of job do you think you might get?*

T: Oh, yeah, I'm not so sure ... (laughs)

PART TWO:

No need talk with machine (Mahmoud)

For the great majority of the CES clients (approximately three quarters of the interview sample) it can be demonstrated that, in the past, literacy had not prevented them from obtaining jobs. This issue seems quite crucial to the main arguments presented in this study, and therefore the experiences of quite a few of the interview sample will be looked at in detail. After all, it would appear a contradiction in terms. All the interview sample are considered long term unemployed, all have been professionally assessed as needing a literacy program in order to assist them in their job prospects, and yet in the past, according to these CES clients, literacy has not played a major role in their ability to obtain jobs. In trying to understand this, the first point emerging from the interviews is that to be long term unemployed 'now', does not mean that these clients have not had full employment in the past.

Take the case of Mary, who explained that she worked from the time she arrived in Australia:

M: Second day we coming here, we started to work ... No English, nothing ... We just er, you know we just show with the hands, we have a job

I: *And what sort of work did you do for all these years?*

M: Eh, I work two years in Speedo, it's um

I: *Oh yeah, I know*

M: Yeah, it's (inaudible) near there

I: *Is it a factory?*

M: Yeah, it was a factory, yeah, I think that they take them out of there now. I don't know what ... And we just had to, you know, the underwear, you know, but we, we no finish it all, we just do a little bit a time each, you know, one pass it to another

I: *Was that sewing or something?*

M: Sewing, yeah

I: *On a machine?*

M: Yeah, the machine, just the (inaudible), you know just the (inaudible) ... and eh, I was two years there, after that I have the two kids and I was home for seven years, then I started work in Ryde hospital in 1972 and I work there for 16 years

I: *What sort of work did you do there?*

M: Cleaner

I: *Right, right ... And did you have to read and write?*

M: No, no, that time no, everybody help that time

I: *So, so for the cleaning you didn't have to do any reading and writing and in the factory you didn't have to do any reading and writing?*

M: No, no, just do the number, just the number ... After 16 years and my husband was very ill and I have to resign

I: *Right, so you left, you left that job, right*

M: He ... I look after for two years, and he pass away nearly four years in January

I: *Right, right, and since that time you, you haven't worked*

Mary's work was unskilled, and her early factory work was clearly based on a Fordist model, but it was employment, and it had little to do with literacy ability.

Later in the interview the focus is more on why she was sent to TAFE for reading and writing and the relationship she sees to her employment prospects:

I: *And they send you here to improve your reading and writing?*

M: ... Yeah reading and writing

I: *... Um because, is it because they think it will help you get a job or why ...?*

M: That's what they think

I: *Yeah, what do you think? Do you think it makes any difference?*

M: No not going to make any difference, no

Others in the interview sample have been self employed, and through relying on help from their wives, they seemed to manage their businesses well.

Pablo, for example, thirty-four years of age, and born in Lebanon, owned a take away shop. He relied on his wife for support, but it is easy to see that he could manage the shop well, despite some literacy difficulties:

P: Yes, couple of years ago ... I'm happy, very happy in the shop

I: *And, and you haven't done any work since then, when you finished that work, yet you haven't found any other work?*

P: No ... I like other shop, another shop

I: *Yeah, because that's your job*

P: I know everything in shop ... I know everything, that's why I'm happy ...

I: *Yeah, and it seems difficult to understand (the loss of the shop - a lease problem) ... Your reading and writing, um, did you have to do any reading and writing when you owned the shop, did you?*

P: Like steak sandwich, yeah, steak sandwich, hamburger, I make hamburger ... Yeah, everything in the shop I know, understand

I: *Did anyone give you help in the shop?*

P: My wife

I: *Oh right, can she read and write?*

P: Yeah, my wife, yeah

I: *Right, so, if you had, if there was something that you couldn't understand, you could always ask ...*

P: My wife next to me

I: *Yeah, but most things, you know, the orders you got used to...*

P: The orders I take orders, I take the orders

I: *Yeah, so your reading and writing, you didn't, was OK?*

P: Yeah (inaudible)

Similarly, Henri, 37 years of age, managed his own Lebanese food business (also with some help from his wife):

I: *And you managed your own business, even though you can't read and write in English?*

H: Yeah

I: *How did you do that?*

H: Everyone do it

I: *Right*

H: It's not eh, it's not hard you know, for if you ask me for things you want to eat, so I know what you want, and my wife she was with me, she reading, write

I: *In English?*

H: Oh yeah, she take the orders, I just prepare

I: *So, so you actually did the cooking did you?*

H: Yeah, I do the cooking, I'm a chef

I: *Oh, right*

Mario, forty-one years of age and Italian born, established himself as a building sub contractor for many years, and from all accounts, was very successful:

M: Then I came back to Sydney, start working with ... (inaudible) big company in the building industry, and er, we were there, I was there for about seven years straight ...

I: *As a builder?*

M: No, I was in construction work, for them, you know, I used to do various different work for them ... I become one of the foremen at the age of 19, then ...

I: *Alright, this is going back a bit...*

M: Then (inaudible) ... I was so good at my work that they approached me if I wanted to go up to Bathurst to do some work for myself .. So I went up there ... Come back to Sydney and I stuck it out by myself since then, since 1975 ...

I: *So you've been a builder all that time?*

M: Yeah, on the concrete game, everything you know ... and er in the last few years, I mean I went through three recession you know, you could say, 75, then the 82, and this, but I never seen anything worse like this ...

I: *And in all that time you've never had any actual qualifications but you've learned everything on the job?*

M: Oh yes, I learned everything in my own way, yes, through the company where things that I have put into this and that work, because up until today, I don't know anybody ring up, they say come back and fix the job

I: *Right, so you've done a professional job ... people have been satisfied, well you wouldn't still be in work after all that time, would you if that had happened?*

M: ... In 75 to 80, put it down to 89, 89/90, er, I done, you know, big jobs... It really breaks my heart ...

I: *Were you in charge of it were you?*

M: Well I was my own boss, yeah, I just deal with the owner or with the bigger builder and that, you know

Mario did have some problems relating to his literacy, but like Henri and Pablo, he too had a literate and supportive wife which enabled him to work effectively. He explains, for example, his problem with independently providing a written quote for a job and the role his wife takes:

I: *Yeah, there's not too any things at home though where you'd have to write ... I can only think of, you know, if you actually have to write a letter to someone*

M: Well, what you have to do with me is say, writing, like for instance, I come to price a job for you ...

I: *Oh yeah, a quote*

M: A quote, yes, so I used to go home and write this quote ... and that's when my problem starts ...

I: *So it is part of the job?*

M: Yes, that's part of the job

I: *So when things are going well*

M: Yes ...I need that

I: *You, you rely on your wife?*

M: Yes, oh yes, a lot, because I then have to write in my own way, then grab her, and say, can you do, please do this for me?

I: *Because otherwise the person's not going to take you so seriously unless ...*

M: Exactly, exactly ... so that's been the case, that's been the case all along ... and er

Predominantly the jobs referred to in the interviews were unskilled jobs and direct links to literacy ability are difficult to establish. Three of the Australian born interviewees, for example, Don, Tony and Victor all demonstrate this. At ages sixty-three, fifty and fifty respectively, all three of these men have extensive work histories.

Don, realistically, is now retired but through his working life he did a range of unskilled jobs, the final one being in a pottery manufacturers. Asked whether reading and writing affected him in his jobs, he answered:

> No ... I wasn't put in a job where ... Once I was shown a job, I knew what to do ... Like there at Fowlers ... I was making the, eh, glaze and that for the spray, to spray on the hands and the washbasins.

Tony has also done a wide range of jobs as the following transcript indicates:

I: *Where did you work before?*

T: I worked in Tuff footwear, about 18 months I worked there...

I: *What sort of work was that?*

T: I was working on a trimming ... I was a machinist, to make a long story short

I: *And the work that you'd done before that's been similar type of work?*

T: Before that I worked with Jackie shoe service in the city, and I got retrenched there too. I was lucky in getting jobs and unlucky in losing them

I: *So you've had employment most of the time have you, I mean, you've been employed, you know, most of your working life?*

T: Yeah, oh yeah. I do admit I have done a bit of travelling round but I've been working ...

I: *And it's always been in that sort of area has it?*

T: Shoes, mainly shoes or restaurants or something. A long while ago I've worked in mining towns, I've worked in the mines ... I've worked in just places just washing dishes ... Mainly I've worked in, you know, doing shoe repairs. My first job I did it for 8 years, my first job

The only difficulties Tony could recollect relating to his literacy (or in this case, numeracy) were those concerning calculating change:

> Well if I, if I ... the reason why they want me to do the reading and writing ... The maths is the most important thing ... The reading and writing is ... I lost a job once in a situation where, say you're a customer and you give me 50 bucks, and you wanna buy this and you wanna buy that,

and I've got to give you the right change, and that's where I'm buggered, you understand? When I worked for the shoe repair, say for instance, if I worked in a pub, and you wanted a whisky and a glass of coke and a box of matches and a packet of cigarettes ... It's a bit difficult ... I can count, you know, 5, 10, 15, 20 ... I can count, but I find it hard with the change, that's why the CES wanted me to come here...

Victor similarly couldn't see much of a role for literacy in his employment background:

I: *... In the previous work that you've done, I mean, has reading and writing, or you know, bit of a problem with the reading and writing, held you back at all?*

V: Well, um, it hasn't actually held me back I suppose as far as the jobs I've been doing

I: *What sort of jobs have you ...?*

V: Eh, well, I've done a list of work over the years, um, from er, say from a wardsman to cleaning to store work to driving, um ...

I: *You've always had employment have you, I mean?*

V: Yes, ah yes

I: *You've never had problems getting jobs?*

V: No, I've always managed to get a job, I, there was one stage when I was three months out of work, but after that I managed to get something else, er, but this has been the longest period that I've ever been without work

Concluding this section are the experiences of three non English speaking background women, Christina, Rosa and Zara for whom it can also be demonstrated that literacy either hasn't played a major part in their ability to get a job or it hasn't affected their performance in a job to any large degree. Christina and Rosa are in fact already in employment, both as cleaners and both part time

only. They are still registered unemployed and are looking for full time work.

Christina, twenty-seven years of age, from the Philippines and in Australia for less than two years, currently works part time as a cleaner in a major Sydney hotel. Christina's comments seem to concur with those of Mahmoud which began this section ('no need talk with machine'):

I: *Do you do much reading and writing in the job, is there any reading and writing?*

C: No, no I just work to them, I work with the a, machine, big machine

I: *Right*

C: Rolling machine

I: *It's a washing and ... yeah ... Do you have to read instructions or is it easy to?*

C: No, no you don't have to because, a, the supervisor, she already teach me how to use

I: *Right*

C Just signing my time in, and before I go

I: *Because the CES, they're saying you can't get a job because you can't speak and read and write good enough*

C: Yeah

I: *And then you get a job yourself, and you don't need to read and write or even speak properly, yeah ...*

Rosa, thirty-nine years of age and born in Portugal (but twenty years a resident in Australia), also works part time as a cleaner, and she too isn't required to use literacy skills to any large degree, partly to do with the nature of the work and partly as she defers to the person she works with:

I: *Is there anything that you have to write at all in your, in your job at the moment?*

R: Not in, not in my position really, because it's always two people working in a place, it's another one, she's more responsible for the work and I'm helping her

I: *She's like your supervisor is she?*

R: Eh, no it's one supervisor for a lot of, you know, half a dozen people, but and, you know, we doing the rooms, cleaning the rooms and that and it's always two people making the rooms, so, if anything wrong with the room or light have to be replaced or something have to be fixed, she writes couple of words ... She can't write like me, but she writes couple of words, so she the one responsible for that ...

I: *Right, but if you could write OK, you'd, you'd be doing the writing?*

R: I'd be doing that, yeah, yeah, because she's the same as me, and she's responsible for the room she, she's doing

I: *So it's like leaving a message ...*

R: Leaving a message

I: *... For the people you work for to say that this is broken or this needs replacing*

R: That's right, yeah something like that, or

I: *So it, so it does affect you now doesn't it ...?*

R: Yeah, little bit, yes, or if somebody er, left, they maybe leave the country or leave to another area, they was there for the night and they left things behind and we have to write, you know, room number and things to say that's the person left this thing behind

I: *Well, there's not much is there but sometimes you do have to, have to write?*

R: Yeah

I: *Is there reading, do they leave instructions for you at all?*

R: Eh, sometimes yes, very (inaudible) instructions, and we have a sheet with all the names of the people and the rooms have to be done, and

So, in Rosa's case, there are some job-related literacy tasks which she would like to undertake better, but her job clearly doesn't depend on them.

Finally, Zara, twenty-seven years of age and born in Lebanon, previously worked in a factory where she was given some line responsibility. She found in fact she could handle this work quite effectively, despite some literacy difficulties:

Z: Actually I was having a good job with this company, I was process worker first, when I start, then I got the line leader job ...

I: *What sort of work was that?*

Z: Just look after the workers on the machines and do all the papers work

I: *Oh did you, right?*

Z: I wasn't really experience with this job but they want me, you know, to try to do it ... and I did it for 6 months, was not too bad. I know I have a couple of things mistake, you know, by the spelling, but I was having my friends there always they give me help so they was good friends with me

I: *So it's like a supervisor type of job was it I mean?*

Z: No, not, under the supervisor, I don't know what they call it but they

I: *Right but you were in charge, in charge of some of the paper work and looking after it?*

Z: Yeah ... that's right, yeah

I: *That was because you were doing a good job there?*

Z: Yeah, and they want me, you know, to do it because they know I'm a good worker and everything fine, you know, for a couple of years, never take sickie or holiday or whatever, I never be bludger with them

I: *Yeah*

Z: And they preferred I do this job, and I wasn't want to do it because I'm frightened I'm not experienced with it and I'm not really good with the English too, and they said, no, we'll give you help to do it, and I did it for 6 months

I: *And that was, you had to do paper work did you and ...?*

Z: Yes, yes, just you know, the things on the line, you know, how many you make on the lines, and if something wrong with the machine, you write it down and everythings, you know, and ... when the workers come down, you know, write their names that (inaudible) today or whatever ...

I: *So, there's a fair amount of reading and writing?*

Z: Yeah, I can read and can write, but not really good, you know ... I can read, like what I know, you know, not exactly like the English people, you know what I mean?

I: *Yeah, yeah*

Z: And I can write the way I know, not exactly like what, because the English

I: *But you can understand it?*

Z: That's right, yeah

PART THREE:

Of course, yes, yes, that's what I'm trying to say, the recession ... (Mario)

A lot of examples have been provided of current CES jobseekers demonstrating that previously (and even currently in some part time work such as cleaning), literacy ability hasn't played a major role in either affecting their ability to get a job or their performance in that job. Much of this work was relatively unskilled and some of these CES clients acknowledge that they cannot 'independently' function effectively with literacy related job tasks, but they can manage with some assistance, either from their spouses or fellow workers.

On the basis of their comments it would have to be concluded that their 'current' ability to obtain employment has less to do with their literacy abilities than other factors, namely, that in a recession, and especially one of the depth of the 1990-93 recession, the jobs just aren't there.

As Mario explained, work in the building industry had declined considerably:

I: *And then for the last, what, two or three years ...?*

M: Yes, well I went to (inaudible) ... it never got off the ground with an architect, and all promise just went up to smoke sort of thing, you know, and er things have never sort of go like, like when I tried to go back to my own job, everybody, all my friends they were closing up, with the bank was demanding ... so everybody was a hard, still very hard time because in all the years before when things were bad, like I didn't have any work at times, er, just one phone call to one of my mates, say yeah, I've got a bit of work, go and help us. Same thing would've worked the other way, but now everyone, haven't ring for the last two years ... Like from 20 blokes went down to 10 or 15, all the way down gradually, and some of them just have to close the door ...

I: *And they're all in the same boat?*

M: Well I can name one or two gentlemen you know, that I never believed that would go and get that bad ... One guy here, that I know for 23 years, he had 40 something workers, and now, I saw him recently before Christmas, er his gonna retrench them all, and he's going to employ them as a subbies, like whenever he's got work, he'll ring up, oh yeah a job, do you want to go do it? I mean, that's not the way to go ... but what can you do ... at the end of the week you can't, you've gotta make the wages to pay the people ... everybody's got problems ...

I: *Yeah, yeah, I guess so, so it's been bit of a shock to you `hasn't it, for the last, last couple of years ...*

M: Well for the last say few years, er I haven't had anybody rung me up, because er, of this, whatever (inaudible) ... unconfidence ... people just aren't ...

I: *The reason for all that though, I mean, the reason you're not working is all to do with the recession ...*

M: Of course, yes, yes, that's what I'm trying to say, the recession ...

The following fairly extensive segment of a transcript of Tony's experiences demonstrates better than most the way in which there is a shortage of jobs in a recession, especially unskilled jobs, and those that do become available create situations in which jobseekers can be exploited and become disillusioned in their quest for a job, and this, according to these jobseekers, has little to do with their literacy ability:

I: *But they send you for maths and reading and writing classes ... I mean, do they think that that is going to directly help you to get a job?*

T: I think so, yes ... I think so ...

I: *Because it really depends on what jobs are around, really, rather than ...*

T: Well I tried a job, the er, last Friday week... I had to go to Kings Cross ... I couldn't find it straight away, because eh,

cafeteria ... It's way up here, I'm looking round here for the number 20, you know ... There was, there was five, yeah five of these papers in front of me, you know ... Then he took me in and showed me the kitchen, and he, and everything, and I thought well, he seems to be interested in me, because I'm a bit, I thought maybe he for a change, somebody wanted me because I was a bit older ... He showed me the kitchen, and I sort of showed him how I could work the dishwashing ... I still didn't get the job ... He, he was one of the jokers who rang me up to let me know I didn't get the job ... They told me before they don't usually ring up and let you know you haven't got the job ...

I: *Did he give you a reason?*

T: Oh, he just said ... I wasn't home, somebody else just give me the message, he said I didn't qualify ... I don't think that's the right word, qualify ... I didn't get in anyway

I: *It's difficult, difficult for them as well I suppose, if they've got a dozen people all turn up for the same, you know ...*

T: And on Monday ... I went for another job, and I worked ... and she said come back .. I got there about half past eleven, she said could you come back about three o'clock ... And I walked around, I went for a walk along the coast there where the boats are at er, Rushcutters Bay ... I come back walking around Kings Cross, waiting, waiting till three o'clock, you know

I: *And that wasn't any good either ...?*

T: And I worked from, I worked, did a bit of work there for an hour and a half ...

I: *They actually put you in there to trial out?*

T: And I worked for, and I didn't get paid for, and I worked for an hour an, but it wasn't very busy though, washing a few dishes, I cleaned the floor up, mopped the floor up, washed a few dishes, that's about all, I didn't do very much, ah I cleaned the toilet out ...

I: *But you did nothing wrong, and you did everything they asked you*

T: And then she gives me a piece of paper ... I didn't get cranky, I hope she doesn't think ... She gives me a piece of paper, where I worked before ... I didn't put down shoes because, I didn't put down, I just give them the experience I done in the kitchen ... I didn't tell a lie, and I put me age down 40, that's the only thing I lied on, and then I said to her, I put me phone number down and I said, I did that work and I said, that means you don't want me ... She said oh, don't get like that, and I said, every time I come and I have a trial, I said, it makes me think that, you know ... They say, they say you've got to think positive ...

I: *But you did nothing wrong, you did everything ...?*

T: No, I did nothing wrong ... maybe there's somethink that I didn't do

I: *How good can you be, mopping a floor, I mean ...?*

T: No, I picked up the mats, took them outside, and did what I said, then she said to me er, could you clean out the toilet, and I thought now where's the toilet, I don't know where the toilet is ... because I haven't used the toilet myself yet, you know, I only just got there you know, maybe that was the problem ...

I: *And has she been doing that with everybody else do you think?*

T: Well, when I first got there, there was a chinese fella, I'll relieve him

I: *So it looks like everyone goes and does it for an hour or so, and then she chooses the best one does she ...?*

T: I'm not too sure ... but I think the chinese man has been there for a long while, he gives me that impression anyway...

I: *But it had nothing to do with your reading and writing?*

T: Oh no, no, no

I: *And even when she asked you to fill that thing in, that was no problem?*

T: No, that was no problem ... I'm getting used to doing them now, I'm getting used to doing them now, you know ... I had to put down, what did I put, the first one I put down was, oh where I worked in a restaurant ... I worked in the Thai Tanic restaurant down here at Newtown, that's closed down now, and I did a bit of work at Grace Brothers, that's closed down now, this is true, I have worked there ... And I worked in the Sorrento restaurant in the Northern Territory, but that was a long while ago ...

I: *But in all of these jobs, it's got nothing to do with your reading and writing that's stopping you getting a job?*

T: No, no ... I don't have to do much reading and writing cutting sandwiches, you know ... When I was cutting, making sandwiches in Sorrento restaurant a long while ago ... beef and tomato sandwich, just put the initials down, BT or something like that

... Even if you can write or read, it's not enough to have other sort of jobs ... (Rosa)

In Tony's case, all he wanted was a job. He was unconcerned at what type of job that might be, though inevitably it would be an unskilled job. From his account and the many others cited in this chapter, the role of literacy ability in obtaining jobs appears quite limited. But this doesn't appear to be the case if the jobseeker aspires to a better job or wishes to make a career shift into an area they think they would like to work in. There are many examples cited by those interviewed of wanting to work in an area, but being unable to do so without a corresponding improvement in their literacy ability.

Greg illustrates this point. At one stage he was interested in welding, but was restricted due to literacy problems, because he couldn't gain the qualifications he needed to work in the area:

I: *Have you found ... What sort of jobs have you had?*

G: Um, well I've got a good like, welding experience ... I started off as a welder

I: *You never did a course or anything like that?*

G: I start ... Yeah, like I was top of my class over here in um, theory, not theory, practical

I: *What, you did a course here at TAFE did you?*

G: Yeah, right, um but when it come to theory and I got in there, just, then I didn't finish it

I: *Right*

G: I, I did it three times, three years in a row, and when it come to looking in the theory room, sitting down and talking and their doing all this stuff, I was lost, you know like

I: *It's a pity that's held you back each time*

G: But the welds, you know, the boss um, you know the teacher there, said, you know I was the best weld there, yeah

I: *Yeah*

Greg was also interested in horticulture. He had done a native bushland program with the local council for six months and had aspirations of working as a tree surgeon, but the literacy required to get him through a horticulture course at TAFE was too forbidding:

I: *Would the reading and writing hold you back on that?*

G: Well that's, it's so hard, I mean I can't see myself ever to do that ...

I: *Even though, what you're saying is that you could cope with the course, but the moment you get the theory and the manuals and things that you have to ...*

G: And it's all botanical names of you know, the latin words and that it's hard enough for someone who can, for you, you know

I: *Yeah, it would be, yeah ... So what you're saying really is that, so the reading is holding you back isn't it, in that, that's an area you could do?*

G: Yeah, I could be doing it now but yeah, that's what's stopping me

Rosa doesn't have high job aspirations, but she does want full time permanent work, unlike the casual cleaning work she is currently doing. In looking at other areas of work, she finds her lack of literacy ability inhibits her job choices:

I: *Right, so your reading and writing doesn't actually affect ...?*

R: Not that sort of work ... Just because I'm looking for full time work I think I maybe don't get as a cleaner full time work, they always on call and things like that, and that's why I think, you know, a shop assistant or anything requires a bit of writing, you've gotta write notes and that and er, I can't do it

I: *So, you're looking at another area for work?*

R: Yeah

I: *And you think that the reading and writing ...?*

R: Well I don't have the education, the qualifications for other sort of work, that's why I can't think of anything else ... Even if you can write or read, it's not enough to have other sort of jobs ... Maybe a shop assistant will do, but er, not, you know, office work or computers or anything like that

I: *You need further qualifications?*

R: Yeah ... Well I don't think I (inaudible) do all that, all that sort of work, you know, but it's good to know how to spell if you need to write something for somebody

I: *And, so what areas are you looking for, for work, what types of um, it's mainly shopwork, is that what you said?*

R: That's what I think, shop assistant will maybe the easiest thing to do without the education

I: *Yeah, 'cos, so it's not just your reading and writing, but you feel that you lack an education as well*

R: Well, I never had an education before

In previous discussions with the CES, Rosa had looked at the possibility of doing dental assistant work, but then found she hadn't the literacy skills (and the formal education) to do this type of work:

I: *Have you ever been for a job where they've said, we can't give you this job because you can't read and write?*

R: Just when I went to CES, I went to look for dental assistant, because I thought, well, it looks alright, that sort of job ... but then CES told me you have to have some sort of English education

I: *Probably School Certificate or High School Certificate or something*

R: No, not a High School Certificate, she say, she said the name of English, reading and writing I have to know, she give me the name, the letters or whatever they say ... That's the level of English you have to know

I: *So you'd have to pass something or you'd have to prove ...?*

R: That's why they send me here because they say for that sort of thing you have to have this level of English

I: *Because that's something, that sort of work, you would consider, I mean you wouldn't mind doing it if ...?*

R: I wouldn't mind doing it as long as they say you have full time work, that's what I'm happy about, or maybe not full time work, like if they say ...

I: ... *Regular*

R: ... Permanent, regular work, like if somebody give me two days a week, right, it's every week two days a week.

There are plenty of other examples from the interviews of literacy skills being considered insufficient for a particular line of work. Mario, for example, the builder, aspires to do consulting work in the building trade, but recognises this will require a lot of written work. Francisco and Wabah are both qualified teachers overseas, but their literacy (and in particular, their oral skills in English) will need to improve before they can continue with their teaching careers in Australia. Theresa currently does part time work in a nursing home, but it's child care she really wants to do, and this requires completing a child care course and the consequent need to improve her literacy skills. Peter wants to do a master's course in diving instruction, but knows his literacy skills are insufficient at present to gain this qualification.

PART FOUR:

... but the other companies now they change a lot, they want everything perfect, you know (Zara)

Several members of the interview sample made the point that the situation had changed in the time that they had been unemployed. The rules for obtaining work had changed, it was now far more difficult to get a job and a higher level of literacy was required, even for jobs that require minimal literacy on the job.

Victor for example, stated:

> And especially now er, when things are so complicated, and they make things complicated, er, unnecessary I think for, for basically routine jobs ... and then after filling out a 4 or 5 page application form, you don't hear anymore about the job, you know, so, it's got the reverse of what it was years

ago, you know, years ago you, you had an interview and, and there and then you were told, and just name and address and what you did last and that was it, you know

Mary also found that even for a cleaning job 'everything change for the hard way':

I: *No, they sent you here, yeah ... What did they think that you'd, because when you did a cleaning job before you didn't need reading and writing?*

M: No, but now, if you go to do a cleaning you gotta know good English and reading and writing because I see many on CES board, you have (inaudible)

I: *What it says on the card does it?*

M: Yes, yes

I: *That you have to read and write well, yeah ... because the job is probably the same, you know*

M: Yes the job is the same, but now change everything change for the hard way, I don't know why

Zara also found that, despite having a successful work background, after more than three years out of work things were now different:

Z: But only this company accept me like this, but the other companies now they change a lot, they want everything perfect you know, and experience everything and like, you have to write good and read good and everything, because so many things happen at work now, not like before

I: *In the last few years?*

Z: Yes that's right, yes, lot of things change

I: *Yeah, because you said it's been three years you said since you've been unemployed?*

Z: Yes three years yes, I wasn't sure you know, but I'm sure more than three years

I: *Yeah, yeah, that's right .. So when you get sent for jobs now is it your reading and writing that holds you back do you think, does it stop you getting work?*

Z: Yeah, yeah, because they give you the first thing when you go in ask for job they give you form to fill it in, and they look ... If you not write nearly (neatly?), you know writing and spelling good, they say sorry, you know

I: *And that's happened to you a lot?*

Z: Yeah, it's happened a lot, that's why I like to do the course here just to help myself to get good job and you know, to help my family

I: *Yeah, that has actually happened to you a number of times?*

Z: That's right, yeah

I: *Even though you can do the job can you?*

Z: I know, yeah, I can do the job but that doesn't accept me you know, because they want me to read good English and write good you know what I mean, and speak, you know, really well

I: *Oh well your speaking's ...*

Z: Yeah but to me it's good but some people that doesn't accept it you know

I: *Yeah, but the actual job probably there's not much reading and writing in the job?*

Z: Yeah but I don't know if they've been ... the last couple of years they really, really fussy and (inaudible) hard to get the job easy, you know what I mean?

I: *Yeah, yeah and there's lots of people looking for work*

These experiences and the perception that only those people with 'perfect' English can now get jobs should be of no surprise. It reflects the prevailing (at the time of the interviews) recessionary conditions in which there are far too many applicants for the few jobs available.

The situation is weighed very much in favour of the employers, and literacy ability is used as a (the) major criterion for obtaining jobs, regardless of the extent to which performance in the jobs require literacy skills. It may well also reflect the screening theory advanced by some researchers in chapter three, though this is difficult to determine within this research study. Giving a person a 'trial' of working for an hour or so in an unskilled job may be as efficient as providing them with a literacy 'test' to determine if that worker has the required 'traits' as determined by the employer.

What is clear from the interviews though is that this situation is accepted by many jobseekers. They accept that the rules have changed and that they will need to improve their literacy skills if they are to have any chance of obtaining work. In the interviews, few clients targetted the recession as the cause of their unemployed status.

The responsibility lay with them and their lack of literacy ability despite the fact that in the past many of them have managed to obtain jobs and have successful work histories.

CHAPTER EIGHT

So why send them to a literacy program? Making links to the dominant discourse

This concluding chapter summarises some of the main issues emerging from the interviews and links them to aspects of the dominant discourse on literacy and the unemployed outlined in chapter three.

The question, *So why send them to a literacy program?* doesn't perhaps need to apply to all of the twenty seven CES clients on the basis of the interview data presented in the last two chapters. For those who were happy to participate and who felt that it would assist them in getting a job, there isn't really an issue here, except that their faith in the power of literacy to deliver jobs may be misplaced. But in particular, this question is important for those who felt they were 'persuaded' to participate and for those who couldn't see any direct relationship between their participation and getting a job.

Few if any in the interview sample would argue that they didn't experience literacy 'problems' of some sort, and the CES and the literacy provider, using their own normative criteria, assessed them to be in need of a literacy program.

But two separate questions need to be posed which have underpinned this research study: Did the CES clients want to participate in a literacy program? And did they really need a literacy program in order to get a job? Based on the interview data presented in this study it is clear that quite a number of the interviewees didn't want to participate and didn't think it would necessarily assist them in getting a job, especially as literacy ability hadn't stopped them from working in the past.

What can't be answered properly within the scope of this study, however, are the responses of both the CES and the literacy provider to these questions. It is, nevertheless, possible to speculate on these responses in relation to some of the CES clients

interviewed in this study, drawing on some aspects of the dominant discourse on literacy and the unemployed.

A discourse in everyone's interests?

Several of the interviewees make reference to the fact that the CES suggested their participation in a literacy program would lead to jobs, or at least assist the process of getting a job. 'That's what they think' said Mary, and similar comments were repeated by several other of the clients.

It is impossible to know the extent to which CES staff actually believed their own rhetoric. In some ways though, it can be seen from a CES staff perspective to be both appropriate and convenient for them to present such a view because what other alternatives are there? In the midst of a recession with little to offer clients (most of whom just want jobs), and with some very difficult-to-place clients, a literacy program may be seen as the answer.

Many of the clients, for example, had only ever done unskilled work in the manufacturing sector, which had suffered very badly in the recession, and some of them would be very difficult to place in jobs even in the best of economic climates.

Medical conditions worked against the possibility of several clients getting work. George, for example, had a workers compensation case pending relating to a back injury he sustained while working with the railways. The case had been going on for years and his major concern was to get it settled.

Mahmoud hadn't worked for thirteen years because of a dust allergy, a medical condition that dominated his discussions in the interview: 'If you, believe me ... any job, dust, I can't work with dust'.

And Saide had damaged her hands and couldn't do her former process-type work, she could now only consider 'light' work.

Age was seen to work against several of the clients. Don, the most extreme example, was sixty-three and semi-retired. Victor and Tony, while both keen to get work, were fifty. Tony was actually in the habit of lying about his age in order to try to overcome age

difficulties. Angelica was fifty-five, Seva fifty-four and Mary fifty. Add the NESB factor and a lack of formal education and these clients meet the criteria of some of the most disadvantaged jobseekers (see pages 15 to 21).

The motivation to work after a long period of unemployment has to be considered also. This did not appear to be a feature of many in the interview sample, but Paul, for example, had been offered a job, but after being unemployed for several years and believing his literacy ability was insufficient, he declined even to attempt the job:

I: *So, you still see that it's because your reading and writing's holding you back ...?*

P: Yes, I think it is ... Well, one of me mates said he'd get me a job at Franklins, out there at Chullora ... Just taking stuff out of pallets, and out of boxes ...

I: *Was that something that was offered to you?*

P: Yes

I: *When?*

P: About two years ago, used to go round taking so many cartons of things out of little boxes, putting them on pallets, for different shops and that

I: *You went for that job did you?*

P: Oh, one of me mates said he could've got me in there, doing it, but that's writing down and everything too

I: *So, even though it's packing and stuff which doesn't require much reading and writing, but there still are things that you have to be able to read exactly, where they go and that sort of stuff ?*

P: Yeah, write it down

I: *So you could've taken that job if you?*

P: ... could read and write

The literacy program option must have seemed attractive to CES staff faced with difficulties in placing many of these clients, especially as all the clients were assessed (by the TAFE college) to be in need of a literacy program, and the discourse indicating the links between literacy and jobs was apparent for all to see in government policy (eg the ALLP). It also fitted well into the context of the longer term goal setting required in Newstart agreements between the CES and individual clients - it was a tangible demonstration that something positive was being done to assist the long term unemployed back into the workforce.

Also, for the CES, once a client was in a literacy program they might no longer be classed as an active jobseeker. It was one less 'unit' to deal with, it helped statistics on the jobless, it was a solution, albeit a temporary one. Adding weight to this speculation are extracts from interviews showing a reluctance on the part of the CES to follow up clients with the same urgency once these clients had been referred to a literacy program. Christina's comments appear to bear this out:

I: *Do they ever check on you, do they ever interview you?*

C: Before?

I: *No, now*

C: Oh, no, since they sent me here until now they never give me call or they never sent me a letter ... But before, before they did not sent me here, they always sent me letter, they always eh, calling me, eh, what is my situation?

I: *But now they don't bother?*

C: No

I: *Maybe that's because you're here, maybe that's because you're coming to college?*

C: Um, maybe

I: *But they never ask you whether you're coming to college, they never ...?*

C: No ... Since they sent me here, they, they did not ring me again

As the interviews indicated many of the clients were happy to be participating in a literacy program, but another factor to be considered might be that their interests were being served in ways that had little to do with literacy. It meant for some clients, temporary relief from pressure exerted by the CES to find jobs. Consider, for example, the following comments from Paul:

I: *Are you looking for jobs all the time?*

P: Not now ...

I: *What 'cos there aren't the jobs to go to?*

P: No, 'cos I'm coming here, so they stopped worrying about me

I: *Oh, right ... Do they interview you every now and again at the CES?*

P: Well, I haven't seen them for the last four months, five months

I: *What, since you started here? And they know you're coming here do they?*

P: Yeah

I: *So, so far as you're concerned, when you go in and they say, well, what have you been doing, you tell them, well ...*

P: I come to TAFE

I: *And they don't hassle you then ...?*

P: No, no ...

Paul in fact participated in the literacy program for one-to-one tuition for just two hours a week, but in doing so managed to not be subjected to the constant pressure from the CES of proving he was

jobseeking. Comments like these, however, were rare in the interviews

It is also clearly in the interests of the literacy provider to have CES clients referred to them. Why would literacy providers challenge a discourse that provides so many fee-for-service students? Besides which, literacy teachers are not specialists in vocational matters. Faced with a CES referred client who demonstrates a degree of literacy problems, it should be no surprise to find the teacher recommending a literacy program and concurring with the dominant discourse believing that this would lead to better job prospects.

And finally, governments promote (and create) this discourse through various policy statements because it enables them to demonstrate 'politically' that they are doing something positive to assist the unemployed to get jobs and ultimately to improve the economy. The dominant discourse on literacy and the unemployed therefore is a discourse that can suit the interests of all parties, CES staff, the clients, the educational providers, and the government generally. And yet despite all of this, it may do little in the way of actually providing people with jobs.

Literacy as deficit and shifting responsibility for unemployment

The interview data presented in chapters six and seven indicate a complex picture. Literacy programs didn't meet the interests of all clients. Some tried to resist participation and hence the discourse. Victor, for example, didn't really want to participate in a literacy program because he didn't think he really needed it and he couldn't see its relationship to getting a job.

The problem for Victor, however, was in initially identifying to the CES that he did have some minor literacy problems. In doing so he triggered the almost inevitable bureaucratic response that saw him persuaded to participate in a literacy program. Victor declared he had some difficulty with complicated application forms and that he had once (many years before) attended an adult literacy course. His concerns about literacy, relatively minor though they were to him, enabled the CES officer to focus on literacy as 'the deficit' that could be related to his unemployed status, and the remedial response to send him to a literacy program:

V: ... and they said OK, you know, because of this, what do you think, what would you like to do, and er, I was a bit sort of vague at the time and I said I don't really know, you know, I said it's not easy looking for work and I think they did mention would I like to do something else, like some kind of a course or something like that, and I, but at that particular time I said, really, no, you know, I said and then ... talking about er what I just mentioned, about the problems I had in eh, maybe filling out a, a bit of a complicated um resume or a complicated um application form ...

I: *And that was when they started to focus ?*

V: And that's when they ... and I did mention that I did do something similar to this

I: *That was it*

V: They more or less said ah, well here we are you know

I: *Maybe they were looking, looking to give you some sort of program*

V: Yeah, well that, that's what I felt, they, they didn't let me walk out the door, I mean they didn't sort of say well OK you know, you come here

I: *It's almost as though they want you to do something for your money or that you have to commit yourself to something*

V: Yeah, yeah, I did feel in a way as I said before it was that they did push me, it wasn't really purely a, voluntary on my side of it, I mean, otherwise I would have perhaps thought about this myself and rung down here you know, and maybe enquired about it, I mean they more or less suggested it and the way they went about it was a little bit subtle, but you know, I did feel that I was given a bit of a, a push

A similar situation can be seen with Christina. With no jobs to offer her, the CES targetted her most obvious 'deficit', her lack of literacy, something that initially made her quite angry:

I: *So, the CES they weren't much help?*

C: No, no, that's why I very angry ... Sometimes, I go there just to get the job, not to sent me here, study ... but I like, I like study because I learn more, more, yeah

I: *But that wasn't why you went to the CES, just to get a job, and they couldn't find you one ... Did they send you anywhere?*

C: Just here

I: *Oh, they didn't send you for any jobs?*

C: No, no

I: *They just said, what, that they said that you need to improve your reading and writing and your speaking, that was what they said?*

C: Yeah

I: *And they sent you here ...*

A similar process may have happened with many others in the interview sample. Some clients resisted the CES to some degree, either participating reluctantly or dropping out, while others realised they didn't have much choice - they risked losing their allowances. Some, however, were in full accord with the CES believing the literacy program was just what they needed.

But whether these clients are 'resisters' or 'accorders' the CES targetted their literacy ability or lack of ability, as the 'deficit', which, if remedied, was seen to assist them in finding jobs. In doing so, the CES and its collaborators (eg literacy providers) were helping the political process of shifting responsibility for unemployment from the field of government policy and macro/structural economics to deficiencies in individuals. Individual CES staff or TAFE teachers may be unaware they are contributing to this process of shifting responsibility, but acceptance of the dominant discourse dictates that they think and act in this way.

As indicated in the introduction to this study, literacy programs specifically for the unemployed, and on the scale of the last few years, are new, resulting from specific Federal Government policy dating from the release of the ALLP in 1991. The implications have yet to be explicated.

The main arguments provided in this study may lead readers to the conclusion that such programs lack validity or that they are in some ways a sham, with some pernicious hidden agenda operating. But such a conclusion can only be reached if the main criteria for the success of these literacy programs are 'jobs'. What this study has demonstrated are some of the complexities involved in assuming that participation in a literacy program is going to make much difference to people getting jobs, especially in a recession.

It needs to be restated here that the intention in this study was to focus on CES client perspectives on their referral to a literacy program and then to view them in relation to the dominant discourse and critiques of the dominant discourse on literacy and the unemployed.

It is clear from issues raised in chapters two and three that this process incorporates an important 'political' dimension and indicates a strong relationship existing between government educational policy involving literacy education and the broader political and socio-economic agendas operating in Australia in the late 80s and early 1990s. The concept of corporate federalism outlined in chapter two is an important element of this.

This study did not aim to assess the success or failure of literacy program participants in terms of their acquisition of cognitive or non-cognitive skills related to literacy. These issues were not pursued in the interviews and therefore it is important that this study not be seen to reflect poorly on literacy programs. Equally, it is important that this study does not reflect poorly on the CES staff who were implementing government policy. Alternative perspectives to the apparent common-sense relationship between literacy and jobs as outlined in the dominant discourse are not readily accessible or understood.

What this study does target though, is the development and promotion of a discourse in which literacy can be used, manipulated even, to serve particular political and socio-economic

interests. In government publications outlined in the early chapters there is an attempt to perpetuate beliefs about the significance of literacy, or the lack of literacy in our society, when they have long been exposed as myths (eg see Grant 1986).

Statements that lack of literacy is strongly related to unemployment or that it 'forces many people to become welfare recipients' are too simplistic and need to be challenged. The reality is more complex. Where is the evidence? There can be no doubt that literacy is vitally important for a great many jobs and of course it can provide considerable empowerment to individuals. But this study hopefully has indicated that the relative absence of literacy skills in English does not automatically render people either unemployable or non-functioning members of society. Many of the CES clients interviewed in this study have demonstrated an ability to be employed effectively and thus contribute economically to society. The problem is that in a recession, the jobs just aren't there, but focussing primarily on the absence of literacy skills among the unemployed will not solve the problem.

APPENDIX

The Interim Literacy Course Matrix

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